Going After Cacciato

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TIM O'BRIEN

Tim O'Brien was born in 1946 in Austin, Minnesota, but he spent most of his childhood in the neighboring city of Worthington, Minnesota. Growing up, he showed great interest in nature and travel, two themes that echo throughout his novels and short stories. O'Brien studied political science in college. In 1968, shortly after graduating, he was drafted into the army and deployed to Vietnam, where he served for nearly two years. O'Brien was a member of the division that was involved in the infamous My Lai Massacre (see below), although O'Brien himself arrived in Vietnam almost a year after this incident occurred. Following his military service, he studied writing at Harvard University, In 1973, he began his career as a writer by publishing the memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. The book received a small but impressive amount of critical acclaim, and has been called the best book ever written about Vietnam. O'Brien continued to write novels and short stories throughout the 70s and 80s, most of which either revolved around or alluded to the Vietnam War. His 1978 novel *Going After Cacciato* was critically acclaimed, and won the National Book Award, one of the highest honors available to an American writer. In the 80s, O'Brien was an energetic activist for better treatment of military veterans, and criticized the American government's lopsided take on its military action overseas. In 1990, O'Brien published the book for which he's best known, *The Things They Carried*. A collection of short stories about Vietnam, many of which O'Brien had written and published in the previous decade, the book received great acclaim, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Since 1990, O'Brien has published three novels: *In the Lake of the Woods*, *Tomcat in Love*, and *July, July*, the latter two of which are much lighter in tone than his previous works.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The central historical event of *Going After Cacciato* is the U.S. war in Vietnam. In the Cold War between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union, the United States increased its military force to prevent communism from spreading to the developing countries of the world, such as Chile, Cuba, Indonesia, Iran, and Vietnam. To achieve this goal, the U.S. sent tens of thousands of its own citizens to fight in South Vietnam in the mid-1960s, with the object of preventing the region from falling under the control of Communist forces. The Communist fighters were the Vietcong, who were based out of North Vietnam and led by the charismatic Ho Chi Minh. Involvement in Vietnam was highly unpopular in the U.S., not least because the government reinstituted the military draft, requiring all able-bodied men to register for service. In the late 60s and early 70s, tens of thousands of young men fled the country rather than register to serve in Vietnam—some because of moral and political convictions, some because they were afraid, and some for both reasons. In Vietnam, American soldiers encountered, and in some cases participated in, extraordinary brutality. In the infamous My Lai Massacre of 1968, American soldiers voluntarily beat, shot, and raped Vietnamese women and children. To this day, the Vietnam War is remembered as one of the worst foreign policy decisions in American history, one of the most traumatic wars for American troops, and one of the most shameful marks on America's record as a "moral" leader in the international community.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Going After Cacciato was one of the earliest American novels about the war in Vietnam to win critical and popular acclaim. As such, it inspired a wave of Vietnam novels, many of which were written in a similarly spare, fragmented style. One of the most notable Vietnam books written in the same period as *Going After Cacciato* was Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977). In this book—like most of O'Brien's *oeuvre*, somewhere between a novel and a collection of short fragments—Herr describes his own experiences as a reporter in Vietnam in the late sixties and early seventies. Herr's novel provided the inspiration for two of the most famous films about Vietnam, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. Another key work of literature worth discussing alongside *Going After Cacciato* is Homer's *Odyssey*. In this Ancient Greek epic poem, the wise hero Odysseus tries to travel back to his home country of Ithaca after the end of the long, brutal Trojan War. O'Brien's novel is an "odyssey" not unlike Homer's, except O'Brien gives Homer an ironic twist. In Homer's epic poem the protagonists are heroes trying to make their way home from war, while in O'Brien's novel the protagonists aren't remotely heroic, even if their "mission" is essentially the same. One final work of literature worth bringing up is *The Things They Carried*, the half-novel, half-short story collection O'Brien published in 1990. Paul Berlin, the protagonist of *Going After Cacciato*, makes several cameo appearances in *The Things They Carried*, as do a few other characters from *Going After Cacciato*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Going After Cacciato*
- **Where Written:** Minnesota
- **When Published:** January 1978

- **Literary Period:** The fragmentary Vietnam War fictions of the late 70s and early 80s
- **Genre:** War novel
- **Setting:** Vietnam, Laos, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Luxembourg, France
- **Climax:** Paul Berlin goes to Cacciato's hotel, armed with the big rifle
- **Antagonist:** None. The novel is dark and sinister, but doesn't have definite antagonists—the sense of evil is more general and pervasive.
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Cute kids: Tim O'Brien has a wife, Meredith Baker, and two children: Tad and Timmy O'Brien.

War wounds: While he was serving as a soldier in Vietnam, O'Brien sustained a serious shoulder wound. As a result, he was awarded the Purple Heart, the military medal that honors deceased or injured soldiers. O'Brien has also been an outspoken advocate for expanding the scope of the Purple Heart to honor soldiers who suffer from mental problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, following their service in war.

PLOT SUMMARY

Going After Cacciato cuts back and forth between several different time periods, all of which are seen from the perspective of a young, inexperienced soldier named Paul Berlin.

As the novel begins, Berlin and his fellow soldiers are in the midst of a brutal war in Vietnam. Berlin's commanding officers are Lieutenant Corson, an old, sickly, and sometimes seemingly senile man, and Oscar Johnson, a young, angry officer. One day in October 1968, the troops discover that Cacciato, a cheerful, simple-minded (and possible mentally challenged) soldier, has gone missing, having first told Berlin that he's planning on walking to Paris. The soldiers decide to chase after Cacciato before he gets too far away. Many of the soldiers, such as Harry Murphy, who wields the squad's "**big rifle**," and the army doctor, Doc Peret, suggest to Corson that they turn back, rather than risk their lives for the sake of one deserter. Corson insists that they proceed. The soldiers track Cacciato to a hill, but are unable to arrest him before a smoke bomb goes off. That night, the soldiers try to arrest Cacciato while he's asleep on a hill. The chapter ends before we can see what happens, and when the plot resumes, two days have passed: the soldiers are still chasing Cacciato through the jungle.

The novel contains many chapters set at a mysterious "Observation Post" overlooking the seas of Vietnam, some time after the soldiers have returned from pursuing Cacciato. Berlin, who is keeping night watch, remembers Cacciato's mad attempt to walk to Paris, and thinks about how Cacciato managed to escape capture for so long. He concludes that "it was possible" to go from Vietnam to Paris—unlikely, but possible. Berlin also thinks about his conflicted relationship with his mother and father as he sits at the observation post. He remembers struggling—usually without success—to win his father's love. He also vividly remembers placing a call to his parents from Vietnam, and being heartbroken when neither of them picked up the phone.

Berlin also thinks back on his earliest days in the military, in June 1968. He was assigned to the 198th Infantry Brigade (in real life, the brigade that witnessed, and in some cases participated in, the My Lai Massacre, and the brigade in which O'Brien served). His commander, Lieutenant Sidney Martin, was an arrogant, proud man who quickly alienated his troops. When the troops encountered a secret Vietcong **tunnel**, Martin insisted that his soldiers "clear" the tunnel before they threw grenades into it. Clearing tunnels was a dangerous job, and many of Berlin's friends died in the process. The soldiers came to despise Martin for insisting on the same procedure at all times.

In late October 1968, Berlin and the other soldiers are still pursuing Cacciato. Harold Murphy has abandoned the others, leaving his big rifle behind—he refuses to endanger his life by going after Cacciato. One day, the remaining soldiers come across a young woman and her two aunts. The young woman, Sarkin Aung Wan, explains that they are trying to flee the country and find safety in the "Far West." Berlin notices that Sarkin is very beautiful. Corson allows the three women to join the soldiers while they pursue Cacciato, though he cautions that they'll have to go a separate way as soon as they find a convenient town.

The narrator reports that one of Berlin's fellow soldiers, Stink Harris, nearly catches Cacciato, but is slightly wounded by Cacciato, and has to let him go free. The soldiers, still accompanied by Sarkin and her aunts, chase after Cacciato through Laos. There, the group falls "through a hole," and ends up in a mysterious underground network of tunnels. (Sarkin's aunts seem not to have survived the fall through the hole, though this is never explicitly stated.) The soldiers crawl through the tunnels, eventually coming across a man who introduces himself as Li Van Hgoc, or Van. Van explains that he's a Vietcong soldier who's been punished for trying to desert the army by being confined to the Vietcong's enormous network of tunnels. Van refuses to let the soldiers leave, pointing out that they're on different sides in the war. Corson orders the troops to tie up Van and destroy everything in his room. The soldiers leave Van and try to navigate their way out of the tunnels, with little success. Suddenly, Sarkin tells the soldiers, "the way in is the way out." With this, she pulls the soldiers toward her, and they "fall out" of the tunnels, emerging in the city of Mandalay.

In Mandalay, the soldiers reside in a hotel, and spend their days trying to track Cacciato through the city. Berlin and Sarkin develop feelings for each other. Sarkin tells Berlin that they must try to reach **Paris**, and then live there for the rest of their lives. One day, Berlin sees Cacciato dressed as a priest. Berlin tries to arrest Cacciato, but a group of Cacciato's new friends—also wearing priestly robes—overpower him, and Cacciato succeeds in eluding the soldiers yet again. Sarkin tells Berlin that she saw Cacciato running to the next train to Delhi—thus, the troops bring Sarkin along as they chase Cacciato to Delhi.

In Delhi, the soldiers stay at the Hotel Phoenix, and spend their days trying to find Cacciato. Lieutenant Corson befriends a young, beautiful hotel worker named Hamijolli Chand, or Jolly for short. Jolly treats the soldiers and Sarkin to a delicious meal, and explains that she studied in Baltimore for two years. Corson seems to be falling in love with Jolly. A few days later, Doc Peret discovers a photograph in the newspaper, showing Cacciato boarding a train to Kabul, Afghanistan. Although the troops need to ship out to Kabul, Corson refuses to join them—he's decided to stay behind with Jolly. The soldiers seem to accept Corson's decision, but later in the evening, when Corson is very drunk, they carry him to the train. When Corson wakes up, he finds himself traveling away from Delhi. He's very sad, but accepts that he'll have to move on.

In flashbacks, the narrator reveals how Lieutenant Corson came to be the commander of his soldiers. Lieutenant Sidney Martin was a talented commander, but he endangered his soldiers' lives. As a result of Martin's insistence on following rules, several soldiers, including Bernie Lynn and Frenchie Tucker, were murdered by Vietcong soldiers stationed in the tunnels. One day, Oscar Johnson proposed to the other soldiers that they get rid of Sidney Martin, rather than wait to be shot by Vietcong. Johnson passes a grenade around to his fellow soldiers—each of them touches the grenade, signaling support for Johnson's plan. The only soldier not present to touch the grenade is Cacciato. Johnson sends Berlin to get Cacciato's support. Cacciato, whom everyone regards as a simpleton, touches the grenade when Berlin offers it to him, but it's never made clear that Cacciato understands what he's voting for. Shortly afterwards, Lieutenant Martin dies—presumably because Johnson murders him—and Lieutenant Corson is brought in as his replacement.

Back in the present, the soldiers and Sarkin travel through Kabul, and then on to Tehran. It is Christmas, 1968, and the soldiers celebrate by drinking alcohol and playing cards. In Tehran, the soldiers are arrested for traveling without the proper identification. They're taken to a jail, where they meet Captain Rhallon, a young, intelligent Iranian officer. Rhallon asks the soldiers about their mission in Iran, and Doc—thinking on his feet—explains that they are pursuing Cacciato to Paris, in accordance with the supposed "Geneva Codes." Rhallon accepts this lie, and accepts that American soldiers have the right to travel through other countries without passports. He even takes the soldiers out for a night of drinking.

Several weeks after their first encounter with Rhallon, the soldiers are arrested again. This time, Rhallon explains that the soldiers are in serious trouble, since they have no proof of their mission to track down Cacciato, and the American Embassy in Iran has no information on American troops from Vietnam traveling through the Middle East. The troops, along with Sarkin, are sent to jail and told that they'll be beheaded at dawn. Berlin has a feverish dream. When he wakes up, he sees the soldiers blowing up the door of their jail cell with grenades. They rush out of the jail, find a car, and drive away from the prison, out of the country.

The soldiers drive from Tehran to Izmir, where they arrange a boat's passage to Athens. The boat ride is uneventful, except that on the final day of travel, the soldiers are horrified to see armed police officers waiting for them at the dock, seemingly ready to make arrests. Stink Harris is so terrified that he jumps off the boat rather than be captured. Amazingly, the other soldiers land and manage to make their ways past the other soldiers without being detected.

The soldiers search Athens, but find little evidence of Cacciato. They hitch a ride through Yugoslavia with a girl from California. From Yugoslavia, the soldiers drive through Luxembourg, and then take the train to Paris. In Paris, the soldiers find a beautiful city—every bit as idyllic as the one they'd imagined. Berlin and Sarkin are especially wowed by the city's beauty. Although the soldiers go through the motions of looking for Cacciato, they're mostly happy to be living in Paris. They rent rooms in a hotel, and money—the narrator claims—"isn't a problem." Berlin and Sarkin become so taken with Paris that they plan to buy an apartment in the city and forget about the military altogether. Berlin tells Corson his plans to leave the army for good, and to his surprise, Corson accepts Berlin's decision. The soldiers have already abandoned the military, Corson argues—they were only pretending to follow a "mission" by going to Paris.

When Berlin returns to his hotel to collect the last of his belongings and move into an apartment with Sarkin, he see his fellow troops, including Corson, assembled outside. Doc informs Berlin that police officers have caught up to them once again—their only chance of saving themselves from imprisonment is to produce Cacciato's body (dead, it's strongly implied), thereby proving that their mission was a legitimate one.

In the coming days, Berlin and the others spend long hours hunting down Cacciato. One day, Berlin finds Cacciato at an outdoor market. He tracks Cacciato back to a hotel and records the room number and hotel address. Berlin then rushes back to the other soldiers to tell them, but is amazed to learn that Corson and Sarkin have run off together. Oscar Johnson becomes the soldiers' new commanding officer, and he orders

them to ambush Cacciato in the middle of the night.

That night, the soldiers, minus Lieutenant Corson, rush to Cacciato's hotel. Oscar Johnson angrily orders Berlin to carry the big rifle into the hotel and use it to "take care" of Cacciato once and for all. Berlin, nearly paralyzed with fear, walks into the hotel, followed by the other soldiers. He walks up the stairs to Cacciato's room, and is surprised to find the door open. Inside, he collapses on the floor, but not before he fires several rounds into the darkness.

In the final pages of the novel, the narrator returns to the day in October 1968 when Berlin and the other soldiers were supposed to arrest Cacciato at the hill in Vietnam. Although the narrator doesn't describe exactly what happened when Berlin tried to arrest Cacciato, it's suggested that Berlin wound up accidentally shooting and killing Cacciato. Corson, sympathetic to Berlin's mistake, reports that Cacciato is missing in action. Afterwards, Berlin and Doc discuss the possibility that they'll be transferred to an observation post overlooking the sea—a safe, secure area. It's suggested that at the observation post, Berlin has been fantasizing about an "alternate timeline" in which Cacciato flees all the way to Paris—that is, the previous events of the novel. Berlin and Lieutenant Corson discuss the possibility that Cacciato might have succeeded in traveling from Vietnam to Paris. Corson agrees with Berlin: the chances of Cacciato succeeding were slim, but it was certainly possible.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Paul Berlin – The protagonist of *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin is a young, inexperienced soldier who spends the majority of the novel struggling with his own conflicted feelings about war, violence, his family, and his peers. In the main plotline of the novel, in which the soldiers chase Cacciato to **Paris**, Berlin strikes up a romance with Sarkin Aung Wan, but this quickly devolves when it becomes clear that Sarkin is only using Berlin to survive. We learn that Berlin has a poor relationship with his parents—but he refuses to admit it, and even tells himself repeatedly that he loves his parents to condition himself to believe a better version of reality. As the novel moves on, it becomes increasingly clear that the main plotline of the book is being imagined and fantasized about by Berlin, as he keeps watch at night over a seaside town in Vietnam. At the end of the book, we discover why Berlin feels the need to fantasize about chasing Cacciato: he was responsible for accidentally firing the shots that killed Cacciato in Vietnam. For all his youth and experience, Berlin is one of the only characters in the book who recognizes the power of storytelling: he uses his fantastic, unbelievable stories as a form of therapy, pushing himself to trade the ugly truth for a better, more optimistic version of events.

Lieutenant Corson – The middle-aged, experienced, and sometimes seemingly senile commander of Paul Berlin's battalion following the death of Lieutenant Sidney Martin, Lieutenant Corson is ironically one of the least authoritative people in the unit. In the main storyline of the novel, Corson gives the order that the soldiers should pursue Cacciato out of Vietnam, but he's mostly passive afterwards, usually deferring to the judgment of the younger, more energetic Oscar Johnson. As Corson moves farther from Vietnam, however, he becomes healthier and more spirited, striking up romances with Hamijolli Chand and later Sarkin Aung Wan, much to Berlin's dismay. Corson is realistic about the futility of the soldiers' mission to capture Cacciato, and says more than once that it's downright pointless. In the novel's ending—that is, in the storyline in which Berlin shoots Cacciato in Vietnam—Corson lies and reports that Cacciato is missing in action, effectively saving Berlin from being court-martialed.

Sarkin Aung Wan – A young woman raised in Saigon—her age is never specified—Sarkin Aung Wan is an intelligent, often wily character, who quickly becomes another member of the soldiers' squad during their mission to **Paris**. The soldiers first come across Sarkin when they shoot her buffalo. Afterwards, she joins their mission, proving her worth by translating the soldiers' words into Vietnamese and, in one surreal interlude, saving the soldiers from a vast **tunnel** by making them "fall out." Sarkin, it's suggested, knows how to use her sexuality to achieve what she wants. While she's close with Paul Berlin for most of the novel, O'Brien implies that she has no special feelings for him: she'll latch on to whomever can help her survive best. Indeed, she ends up running off with Lieutenant Corson in Paris.

Stink Harris – An American soldier in the Vietnam War, and assigned to the same battalion as Paul Berlin, Stink Harris is an idiosyncratic Southerner who becomes violent and almost sociopathic as a soldier. He seems to enjoy firing his gun whenever possible, and makes gruesome jokes about killing women and children. He vanishes from the novel after jumping into the sea, convinced that the police are coming to arrest him.

Cacciato – The titular character of O'Brien's novel, and by far its most enigmatic presence, Cacciato is a young, round-faced American soldier who decides to leave the army and journey to **Paris**. While the soldiers often complain that Cacciato is a simpleton, and even imply that he's mentally handicapped, Cacciato often seems far wiser and clear-headed than the people around him: while the other soldiers agonize over their decision to murder Sidney Martin, Cacciato excuses himself from the discussion. The soldiers' mission to track down Cacciato as he journeys to India, Iran, and other countries (in no small part because they think he'll betray their murder to the authorities) forms the bulk of the novel's plot. Throughout these chapters, Cacciato is described as being almost superhuman, or endowed with the qualities of a saint or a

religious figure. Toward the end of the novel, however, we begin to see the truth: Paul Berlin, Cacciato's friend, accidentally shot Cacciato as Cacciato was beginning his journey to Paris. The novel we've been reading, then, is a fantasy constructed by Berlin as a way of fighting his own acute sense of guilt.

Harold Murphy – An American soldier in the Vietnam War, and assigned to the same battalion as Paul Berlin. Harold Murphy is the first soldier in squad three to refuse to pursue Cacciato. He leaves the other soldiers while they're still in Vietnam, explaining that he doesn't want to endanger his life by crossing into Laos.

Oscar Johnson – A sergeant in Paul Berlin's battalion, Oscar Johnson is a tough, experienced soldier who's enormously respected by his peers for having survived nine previous tours in Vietnam. During the course of the novel, Johnson is often the leader of the other soldiers, particularly after Lieutenant Corson's health takes a turn for the worse. Johnson is always one of the strongest advocates for continuing the mission to **Paris**, and at the end of the book, when Corson abandons his troops, Johnson becomes their commanding officer. Johnson is shown to despise Berlin, whom he regards as "soft" and childish. Johnson makes a series of difficult decisions in the novel, and is the first to propose that the soldiers murder Lieutenant Sidney Martin. Johnson always stresses the important of survival at all costs—he is, in short, a perfect, remorseless soldier.

Billy Boy Watkins – An American soldier in the Vietnam War, whose foot is blown off by a land mine, and later dies of a heart attack brought on by his own fear. Although Billy Boy Watkins has a very small role in the book, his death is a milestone event for the other soldiers, especially Paul Berlin, in part because it proves that a soldier's greatest enemy is his own fear.

Lieutenant Sidney Martin – Lieutenant Sidney Martin is the proud, arrogant commander who leads Paul Berlin's squad at the beginning of the novel. Martin quickly alienates his troops by demanding that they "clear" all Vietcong **tunnels** before throwing grenades into them—a strategy that results in the deaths of many of Martin's troops, including Bernie Lynn and Frenchie Tucker. Although O'Brien never says so explicitly, it's strongly suggested that Martin's own soldiers, led by Oscar Johnson, agree to kill Martin with a grenade, reasoning that they'll be safer with another lieutenant.

Bernie Lynn – An American soldier in the Vietnam War, assigned to the same battalion as Paul Berlin. Bernie Lynn dies after going to retrieve the injured Frenchie Tucker from a **tunnel**, following Lieutenant Sidney Martin's orders. Lynn is also shot by a Vietcong soldier in the tunnel, and like Tucker, he dies from his wounds later.

Doc Peret – The medic and unofficial scientist of Paul Berlin's battalion, Doc Peret is an intelligent, quick-thinking soldier who uses his intelligence and ingenuity to care for his patients. Peret is never shown to save anyone from dying—a grim demonstration of the Vietnam War's lethality—but he's successful in numbing the pain of those who are slowly dying, such as Bernie Lynn. Peret also proves himself to be quick under pressure when he bluffs his way through an interview with Captain Fahyi Rhallon in Tehran, saving himself and his fellow soldiers from being imprisoned for desertion.

Frenchie Tucker – An American soldier in the Vietnam War, assigned to the same battalion as Paul Berlin. Frenchie Tucker dies while clearing a **tunnel**, following Lieutenant Sidney Martin's orders. When a Vietcong soldier shoots him through the nose from inside the tunnel, Tucker dies a slow, painful death, providing his friends with a clear motive to kill Lieutenant Sidney Martin.

Jim Pederson – A religious, highly moral soldier who serves in the same battalion as Paul Berlin, Jim Pederson is regarded as the voice of right and wrong among his fellow soldiers: he's shown to be more ambivalent than most about the soldiers' actions, and protests when the soldiers propose burning a Vietnamese village. Pederson is wounded during his time in Vietnam, and is taken to a hospital, where his fate is left unclear.

Eddie Lazzutti – An American soldier in the Vietnam War, assigned to the same battalion as Paul Berlin, Eddie Lazzutti is an occasional friend to Paul Berlin, as well as a talented singer. When a particularly tragic event occurs among the soldiers, Eddie is often the first one to convert it to comedy, singing about it until everyone else joins in. In the main plotline of the book, Eddie is one of the only soldiers to travel all the way to **Paris** to track down Cacciato.

Hamijolli Chand (Jolly) – A charismatic Indian woman, Hamijolli Chand serves as a host and entertainer for the soldiers during their time in the city of Delhi. She's immediately interested in meeting Americans, since she studied for two years in Baltimore, Maryland. Although she has a husband, it's suggested that she sleeps with Lieutenant Corson, possibly because she thinks he can help her "get ahead" in life. Jolly is regarded by the other soldiers as a "phony," who only pretends to be likeable and charming. She disappears suddenly, leaving Lieutenant Corson alone, and we never hear from her again.

Captain Fahyi Rhallon – The Iranian police officer who interrogates the soldiers on the suspicion that they're deserters. Captain Fahyi Rhallon is a polite and civil man who nonetheless believes that deserters should be beheaded for their crimes. After Doc convinces him that the soldiers are in Iran legally, Rhallon takes them out for drinks, and explains that he believes that the war in Vietnam is being fought for immoral reasons. In later chapters, Rhallon arrests the soldiers a second time, and again arranges for their beheading, even while he claims to be doing everything he can to save their lives.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ready Mix – A fellow soldier of Paul Berlin, who's killed in the midst of a long, bloody battle in the jungles almost as soon as he enters combat.

Rudy Chassler – An American soldier in the Vietnam War, assigned to the same battalion as Paul Berlin, Rudy Chassler dies after stepping on a land mine.

Sergeant Ulam – An Iranian officer who arrests the soldiers on suspicion of desertion.

Water Buffalo / Buff – An American soldier in the Vietnam War, assigned to the same battalion as Paul Berlin. Water Buffalo dies shortly after Berlin becomes a soldier.

Li Van Hgoc / Van – A Vietcong soldier who tried to desert the Vietcong, and as punishment is sent to live in the Vietcong's enormous underground **tunnels** for the rest of his life.

Vaught – An American soldier in the Vietnam War, assigned to the same battalion as Paul Berlin.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FANTASY, MAGICAL REALISM, AND STORYTELLING

When *Going After Cacciato* was published in the late 1970s, critics weren't sure how to classify its peculiar combination of gritty war realism and fantasy. There are scenes in the novel that seem extremely realistic, scenes that require the suspension of disbelief, and some scenes that are nothing short of impossible—indeed, the plot of the book itself (a group of US soldiers travels all the way from Vietnam to **Paris** in search of a soldier from their platoon who has wandered off) sounds like a fairy tale. In one chapter, O'Brien realistically describes American soldiers' long, dull hours of hiking through mountains in Vietnam, during which their only forms of entertainment are singing and eating candy. In another, O'Brien describes how the same soldiers break out of a prison using grenades. There's even a nightmarish series of chapters in which the soldiers "fall" through a hole, walk around beneath the ground, and then "fall out" of the hole. The issue, then, is understanding O'Brien's blend of the believable and the unbelievable, and incorporating it into our comprehension of the book as a while.

One of the most common phrases critics used to describe *Going After Cacciato*, at least at the time, was "magical realism." The genre of magical realism is most commonly associated with the works of Latin American novelists like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende, and, later on, English language novelists like Salman Rushdie and Toni Morrison. In a work of magical realism, the characters witness and experience events that could not, by any measure, occur in the real world, and yet they do not regard these events as unusual in the slightest. Certainly, magical realism is a useful concept for understanding the tone of O'Brien's novel. When the soldiers fall through the hole in the ground and then "fall out," they're frightened, irritated, but—strangely—not that surprised. It's as if in the chaos of war Vietnam has become a place where everyone has accepted that the laws of physics and normal reality don't apply anymore: magic has become the accepted reality.

While magical realism can help us understand some of O'Brien's literary choices in *Going After Cacciato*, it doesn't quite do justice to O'Brien's use of perspective. A crucial element of the magical realist novel is that *everyone* agrees on what is magical and what is normal. (When the soldiers fall out of the hole, for example, not one of them finds the experience abnormal in any way.) And yet O'Brien always sets an asterisk next to the word "everyone." The majority of the novel is told from the perspective of the young, inexperienced soldier Paul Berlin—a man who is constantly struggling to make sense of his position in Vietnam. At many points, it's suggested that the story of Berlin's journey from Vietnam to Paris—in other words, the plot of the novel we're reading—is a story Berlin is telling *himself* as a way of coping with his fear and anxiety. It's as if the more fantastic parts of the book are playing out in one man's head—not because he believes they could really happen, but because he needs to believe in something.

In the end, O'Brien makes a more complicated point than the one his original critics thought they'd picked up on. While it's impossible to tell where the "magical" parts of O'Brien's story end and the "real" parts begin, this shouldn't suggest that everything in the book is magical realism. The point is not simply that reality has become magical, or that all soldiers come to accept that reality is a nightmare. Rather, O'Brien suggests that people, especially people in danger, need to tell themselves magical, far-fetched stories to make sense of their lives. Stories give people hope, and provide them with the strength to survive.

VIETNAM AND THE CHAOS OF WAR

Going After Cacciato takes place during the height of America's involvement in the Vietnam War. While there's relatively little information *about* Vietnam in the novel—in fact, it takes more than a hundred pages before the word "Vietnam" is mentioned—it's important to understand the background of this war, and Tim O'Brien's experiences in it.

Between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s, the United States gave military and financial aid to its allies in South Vietnam, trying to prevent South Vietnam from falling under the control

of Communist forces. The Communist soldiers were known as the Vietcong, and they were based in North Vietnam and were led by Ho Chi Minh. Under the presidencies of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon, the United States deployed hundreds of thousands of troops to Vietnam, and waged chemical warfare on the land of Vietnam itself by dropping millions of pounds of bombs and napalm into its forests. During this time, many in the United States came to oppose America's involvement in Vietnam, protesting outside the White House and, in 1968, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In 1968, news of the My Lai Massacre reached the United States, and it was shown that American troops massacred a village of unarmed civilians, including women and babies, and abused Vietnamese women before murdering them.In the late 60s, when the government instituted a military draft requiring all able-bodied men to sign up for military service in Vietnam, many Americans became "draft dodgers"—some people fled to Canada to avoid being sent to Vietnam, and many soldiers who fought in Vietnam "went AWOL" (absent without leave) rather than fight in the brutal war. A decade before he wrote *Going After Cacciato*, Tim O'Brien was himself a soldier in the Vietnam War, and he's continued to write about Vietnam for the rest of his career as an author.

Going After Cacciato doesn't offer up any grand statements about the war in Vietnam itself—in fact, the majority of its plot doesn't take place in Vietnam at all. O'Brien also avoids directly discussing the most painful elements of American military involvement in Vietnam, such as the massacre of innocent women and children at My Lai. But this doesn't mean that *Going After Cacciato* doesn't take a moral or political stance against the war in Vietnam. On the contrary, O'Brien shows how the moral incoherence of America's motives in the war in Vietnam "trickled down" to the soldiers in the war. As Doc, the friendly military doctor, argues, none of the soldiers in the war have a clear idea why their country is at war with the Vietcong. As a result, it's almost impossible for a soldier to feel "right" about any of his actions. Indeed, O'Brien makes it clear that almost none of the soldiers' missions have any clear benefits, either for themselves or for the "civilians" they're supposed to be protecting. Battles always end with a stalemate, not a victory. Even the military's high-ranking officers, such as Lieutenant Corson, are shown to be exhausted by the fighting. Although he doesn't discuss My Lai directly (it's a major aspect of his later novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*), O'Brien makes it clear that the war in Vietnam encouraged soldiers to be cruel and sadistic—we can see this in the nightmarish scene in which the soldier Stink empties his gun into a large, defenseless buffalo.

O'Brien's diagnosis of the war in Vietnam itself—that it was an incredibly misguided, chaotically-run operation that endangered as many lives as it protected—isn't exactly groundbreaking anymore. But when the novel appeared in 1978, the American mainstream hadn't yet decided what to think of Vietnam. O'Brien's novel, along with the creative work of such figures as Michael Herr and Oliver Stone, helped solidify American cultural opposition to the war.

OBLIGATION VS. ESCAPE

Toward the end of the novel, Paul Berlin, a young, inexperienced soldier in the Vietnam War, meets with his on-off girlfriend, a half-Vietnamese, half-Chinese woman named Sarkin Aung Wan, and has a long, formal argument with her. Sarkin and Berlin are living together in **Paris**, but Berlin has to make a choice between his duty to his military commanders and his desire to spend all of his time with Sarkin. Sarkin argues that Berlin should escape from his military obligations, since he's suffered enough for them already. Berlin, much to Sarkin's surprise, takes the opposite point of view. He argues that he should value his obligations to other people above than anything else—even his love for Sarkin.

It's clear from early on in *Going After Cacciato* that the distinction between obligation and escape is one of the novel's most important themes. And yet for most of the book, these two concepts don't seem to be clearly distinguishable. A group of American soldiers, led by Lieutenant Corson, travels through Vietnam, then Laos, and then India and Afghanistan, all to hunt down a deserting soldier, Cacciato. While the soldiers have a clear duty to capture Cacciato—since he's a soldier who's breaking the law by going AWOL—it's equally obvious that they themselves want to escape Vietnam and pursue Cacciato all the way to Paris, because they'd much rather be in the safe, beautiful city of Paris than the war-torn jungles of Vietnam. The soldiers are all traveling to Paris, but it's not clear if they're doing so because it's their duty, because it's their desire, or both. The only characters who are unambiguously traveling to Paris because of their own, selfish reasons are Cacciato himself and Sarkin.

Once the group of soldiers, along with Sarkin, arrive in Paris, it quickly becomes clear that obligation and escape (in other words, one's loyalty to others versus one's loyalty to oneself) can't coexist for long. Berlin, egged on by Sarkin, wants to stay in Paris for the rest of his life, while his fellow soldiers urge him to leave Sarkin and focus on capturing Cacciato, so that they won't be arrested under suspicion of desertion. In the end, Sarkin betrays Berlin by running off with Berlin's commander, Lieutenant Corson. Berlin, by contrast, had refused to escape with Sarkin, because he valued his duty to his fellow troops more highly than his personal desires. Berlin argues that he couldn't betray his fellow soldiers, because his loyalty to these soldiers was an important part of his personality: by escaping the army for good, he would be breaking his own personal identity. Although it's highly critical of the American military, *Going After Cacciato* raises the point that obligation has great

value, regardless of the moral worth of the thing to which one is obligated. Berlin has every reason to stay in Paris—it's the safest choice, the most pleasurable choice, and even the most moral choice. And yet staying in Paris conflicts with his obligations to his peers—so he chooses not to stay.

In the end, O'Brien brings us to a frustrating "lose-lose" conclusion. Berlin chooses to remain loyal to his fellow soldiers, only to find that they despise him and regard him as a weakling. Berlin has no winning move: either he stays with his peers and remains miserable, or he runs off with Sarkin and confirms that he's a selfish traitor. All people have to deal with the conflict between their own desires and their duties to other people, but only a few people have to deal with this conflict in such black-and-white terms. The only thing that can relieve the tension between obligation and escape is the story of Cacciato itself: when the soldiers go after Cacciato, their sense of duty and their desire for happiness become one and the same—if only for a time.

DISCONTINUITY AND TRAUMA

Going After Cacciato's plot and style are occasionally fantastic and far-fetched, but what's arguably more jarring about the novel is what O'Brien leaves *out* of the story. At least half a dozen times, O'Brien ends a chapter on a "cliffhanger"—a suspenseful, seemingly unresolvable climax—and then, in the next chapter, flashes forward to a time when the cliffhanger has been inexplicably resolved. Thus, it's not described how the soldiers find their way out of the **tunnel** in Laos, or how they lose Cacciato in the hills of Vietnam. Many of the other "important" parts of *Going After Cacciato* are also deliberately omitted, such as the soldiers' murder of their commander, Lieutenant Sidney Martin. It's as if O'Brien is leaving out the parts of his novel that he knows we want to read most.

One major reason why O'Brien structures his novel in this unorthodox way is that he wants the structure of his book to mirror the feverish imagination of his protagonist, Paul Berlin. It's never entirely clear if the events of the book are happening in the real world, or if they're playing out, at least partly, in Berlin's imagination as he stands at an observation post overlooking the sea. O'Brien reinforces this sense of disorientation by leaving out the resolutions to his cliffhangers: he implies that Berlin, the "author" of his own story, is making things up as he goes along, brushing over the snags and contradictions in the plot.

And yet there's also a deeper, and arguably more important reason why O'Brien emphasizes the discontinuities in his novel: the influence of war. The Vietnam War was the first American war during which medical researchers uncovered evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, in veterans. Even now, there are tens of thousands of American soldiers who suffer from the trauma of the events they witnessed during the war. One way that the human mind reacts to trauma is to repress the original experience. There are even cases in which victims of war or violence forget what they saw, and replace their memories with new, milder experiences. When read in this way, the discontinuities in *Going After Cacciato* function as a kind of psychological defense mechanism. Thus, Berlin and his fellow soldiers "forget" that they murdered Sidney Martin in much the same way that the text of the novel skips over this important event in the plot.

The problem with this form of repression is that it's always impermanent. It's impossible to truly and completely forget a traumatic experience—one can repress it for a time, but the memory will resurface with a vengeance later on. And even when the memory is supposedly suppressed, it remains a sinister presence in one's mind, causing other psychological problems. This is apparent in the case of Sidney Martin's death. It's clear that Berlin and the other soldiers are responsible for Martin's murder, but ironically, the fact that O'Brien offers no literal description of Martin's death makes the event even more sinister in our imaginations.

For the most part, O'Brien doesn't "fill in" the gaps in his novel with untruths—the gaps remain empty (perhaps so we notice them better). This is the case in the final two chapters of the novel, during which it's revealed that Berlin may or may not be responsible for murdering Cacciato, his former friend. It's left up to the reader to decide what happens, meaning that Berlin's ultimate guilt in the mission is left agonizingly unclear, as is the question of whether Berlin is actually making up the entire story of *Going After Cacciato* to alleviate this guilt. Perhaps O'Brien (himself a soldier in Vietnam) leaves so much in his novel unresolved because he simply isn't ready to talk about what he experienced as a soldier. In later works like *The Things They Carried* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien deals with the theme of trauma while discussing the violence and chaos of Vietnam much more overtly. For the time being, however, the gaping discontinuities in his novel stand in for all the terror he and his fellow soldiers experienced.

SURVIVAL AND SELF-PRESERVATION

Arguably the most basic and important theme of *Going After Cacciato*—the theme on which all others are predicated—is that of survival and self-preservation. While survival seems to be perfectly straightforward—as Doc says, "Don't get shot"—the novel demonstrates that survival can be a complicated process in which there's not always a clear, or even a correct, choice.

Survival dictates the most important choices that the novel's characters make, and yet these choices must themselves be "survived" with. When the soldiers' first lieutenant, Sidney Martin, orders them to "clear" Vietcong **tunnels** before blowing

up the tunnels, the soldiers quickly learn that tunnel clearing is a dangerous, often suicidal undertaking. Every time Martin orders a soldier to clear a tunnel, he's effectively ordering the soldier to die. As a result, the group, led by Oscar Johnson, agrees to kill Sidney Martin with a grenade. The choice seems to be a straightforward case of "kill or be killed"—self-preservation is the unbreakable principle underlying each soldier's choice.

And yet self-preservation is far more complicated than preserving one's body. Preserving the "self" means preserving one's sanity—in short, living with one's choices. One way that the soldiers live with their experiences is to talk about them—laughing, joking, and singing until the horrors of war don't seem so bad. This is their strategy when dealing with the death of Billy Boy Watkins, a soldier who seemingly dies of a heart attack. But at other times, the soldiers preserve their "selves" by *refusing* to talk about what they've seen and done. This is the case with Lieutenant Sidney Martin—after he dies, they never mention him again. Saving one's body is often a split-second decision, while saving one's mind, by contrast, isn't so much a choice as it a constant process with no clear end in sight.

In the end, *Going After Cacciato* demonstrates that self-preservation is rarely an easy process. There are even times when one must make a choice between saving one's body and saving one's sanity. In the final chapters of the novel, Paul Berlin chooses to leave Sarkin in Paris and remain with his fellow soldiers, hunting for Cacciato, despite the fact that doing so will place him in danger once again. As Berlin explains it, he chooses to remain a soldier because he couldn't respect himself as a deserter. But the truth is that Berlin *needs* the other soldiers to maintain his sanity: he needs to be around the people who've experienced the same things he's experienced. In these chapters, survival isn't a clear-cut choice. It's an agonizing decision, one to be weighed and fretted over for days and weeks and years. As is the case throughout O'Brien's novel, the war allows no winning move for Paul and his friends.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PARIS

For most of the novel, Paul Berlin and his fellow soldiers are trying to travel to Paris. Paris is significant in the history of Vietnam, both because France once occupied Vietnam as a colonial power (affecting all its political turmoil since) and because it's the city in which Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho negotiated peace in Vietnam in 1973. (Paris has also hosted many peace negotiations—the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, for example). While the purpose of the soldiers' mission to Paris is supposedly to track down Cacciato, a soldier who's gone AWOL, it's clear from very early on that the soldiers also *want* to go to Paris—a beautiful, peaceful city without any of the dangers they've become accustomed to in Vietnam. Paris symbolizes a physical place of security and ease, and also a state of mind in which the soldiers are untroubled by their trauma and guilt. It doesn't take long for the soldiers to discover that Paris simply isn't this place, however: there's no way to run from one's own psychological problems.

TUNNELS

During the Vietnam War, the Vietcong dug enormous, complicated networks of tunnels underground. About a third of the way through *Going After Cacciato*, the soldiers stumble into one of these tunnels, and find themselves unable to escape. The tunnels have many complex symbolic meanings. They suggest, in an almost Freudian sense, the pain and evil that the soldiers have experienced in Vietnam, and are trying—without much success—to "bury." Another possible interpretation of the tunnels hinges upon a common motif in epic stories about heroes and adventures. In many such works (the *Odyssey*, *The Hobbit*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, etc.), the protagonist must literally travel underground in order to confront his own weaknesses and limitations, and be reborn a stronger, more heroic figure. This, O'Brien makes clear, is precisely what *doesn't* happen when Berlin and his fellow soldiers travel through the tunnels: the experience doesn't make them any stronger or wiser. In telling his own dark "odyssey" through Eurasia, O'Brien uses tunnels to cleverly twist the motif of the epic to suggest that in Vietnam, the old notions of good and evil, heroes and villains, simply don't apply.

THE BIG RIFLE

In the novel, the soldiers carry guns of many different sizes—the biggest of these, the "big rifle," is a large, powerful firearm, usually entrusted to one of the most experienced soldiers. For much of the novel, Harold Murphy carries this weapon, while at other times, Oscar Johnson does. By the end of the novel, however, Paul Berlin is the one who must use the rifle to kill Cacciato, whom he's tracked down to a hotel in Paris. The fact that Berlin now carries the big rifle suggests that he's matured as a man and a soldier, but the fact that Berlin is unable to use the rifle successfully (he fires blindly, and it's not clear if he hits anything), suggests that Berlin is still young, and in many ways inexperienced.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Broadway Books edition of *Going After Cacciato* published in 1999.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Paul Berlin watched through the glasses as Cacciato's mouth opened and closed and opened, but there was only more thunder. And the arms kept flapping, faster now and less deliberate, wide-spanning winging motions—flying, Paul Berlin suddenly realized. Awkward, unpracticed, but still

flying.

Related Characters: Cacciato, Paul Berlin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien here sets the surreal, rather confusing tone of his novel. Paul Berlin, a young soldier fighting in the Vietnam War, has been tasked with following Cacciato, a mysterious soldier who's apparently deserting the army. As Paul tries to track down his former peer, he finds Cacciato moving through the plains of Vietnam, apparently flying. O'Brien never entirely explains whether this scene is real or imagined. Berlin is portrayed as an unreliable narrator with an active fantasy life, but it's also possible that the novel itself—not Berlin—is meant to be fantastic and unrealistic. O'Brien chooses to write his novel in such a way—blurring the line between fantasy and reality—because he feels that such a book is the only honest way to deliver an account of the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, many American soldiers like Paul Berlin confronted unspeakable horrors and sustained deep psychological wounds, eventually, they could no longer distinguish between nightmare and the real world. The sight of Cacciato stretching his "wings" and trying to fly conveys the soldiers' frantic desire for freedom and escape in a way that a totally realistic novel could never manage.

Chapter 5 Quotes

He would go to Europe. That's what he would do. Spend some time in Fort Dodge then take off for a tour of Europe. He would learn French. Learn French, then take off for Paris, and when he got there he would drink red wine in Cacciato's honor.

Related Characters: Cacciato, Paul Berlin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Paul Berlin, stationed on a beach, imagines escaping from his duty in Vietnam and traveling to Europe, where he dreams of leading a leisurely, sensual life of wine and women. O'Brien keeps returning to the image of Berlin sitting on the beach, and at first, it's unclear when, exactly, Berlin is sitting there. But as the novel goes on, it becomes clearer that Berlin is remembering—and at times, fantasizing—about a search for Cacciato in which he participated recently.

Perhaps the key phrase in this section is "in Cacciato's honor." For Berlin, Cacciato (and Paris, the city with which he's associated) is a symbol of escape from the terrors of Vietnam: although Berlin and his fellow soldiers have been tasked with capturing Cacciato, they secretly regard him as something of a hero for finding a way out of the nightmarish world in which they're trapped.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Then they were falling. Paul Berlin felt it in his stomach. A tumbling sensation. There was time to snatch for Sarkin Aung Wan's hand, squeeze tight, and then they were falling. The road was gone and they were simply falling, all of them, Oscar and Eddie and Doc, the old lieutenant, the buffalo and the cart and the old women, everything, tumbling down a hole in the road to Paris.

Related Characters: Lieutenant Corson, Eddie Lazzutti, Oscar Johnson, Sarkin Aung Wan, Paul Berlin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Paul Berlin and his fellow soldiers have stumbled upon a secret Vietcong lair, which may or may not be booby-trapped. Berlin and his fellow soldiers fall underneath the ground, though O'Brien never describes exactly how. It's left up to us to decide whether the episode is real or imagined: certainly, American soldiers encountered more

surreal spectacles during their service in the war (and the Vietcong did have a complex system of tunnels during the war), and yet O'Brien depicts the soldiers' fall underground in fantastical terms that echo Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, making us wonder if the entire scene is a dream or hallucination of some kind.

The soldiers' fall is deliberately paralleled with Cacciato's flight: Cacciato is slowly freeing himself from his duty to the military, while his fellow soldiers find themselves mired in the horrors of war. Once again, the soldiers associate Paris with peace, escape, and tranquility--and the hole into which they have fallen delays their journey to Paris. (Of course, it's worth noting that the peace and prosperity of Paris comes in part from the exploitation of poorer countries and its former colonies like Vietnam--surely a deliberate choice of symbol on O'Brien's part.)

Chapter 11 Quotes

They spent the night along the Song Tra Bong. They bathed in the river and made camp and ate supper. When it was night they began talking about Jim Pederson. It was always better to talk about it.

Related Characters: Jim Pederson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Berlin and his fellow soldiers are hiding something. Having fought in one of the bloodiest wars in American history, they've seen tremendous death and destruction; they've also committed acts of violence against innocent civilians, as well as against their own peers. In other words, every soldier in the army is living in a state of constant guilt and fear.

O'Brien, who served in Vietnam himself, is very perceptive about how soldiers deal with their pain. The best therapy is talking: by keeping their feelings bottled up, the soldiers run the risk of cracking under the pressure of keeping their own tragic secrets. Through conversation and gallows humor, the soldiers find an outlet for their feelings, which allows them to regain a sense of solidarity and community, and remember that they're not the only ones feeling guilty and anxious.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"The soldier is but the representative of the land. The land is your true enemy." He paused. "There is an ancient ideograph—the word Xa. It means—" He looked to Sarkin Aung Wan for help.
"Community," she said. "It means community, and soil, and home."
"Yes," nodded Li Van Hgoc. "Yes, but it also has other meanings: earth and sky and even sacredness. Xa, it has many implications. But at heart it means that a man's spirit is in the land, where his ancestors rest and where the rice grows. The land is your enemy."

Related Characters: Sarkin Aung Wan, Li Van Hgoc / Van (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Paul Berlin and his fellow troops--along with a Vietnamese woman named Sarkin, whom the soldiers have encountered during their mission--fall into a tunnel and stumble upon a Vietcong soldier named Li Van Hgoc. Because he tried to escape the Vietcong, we slowly realize, Hgoc has been forced to live in the tunnel, never to see the light of day.

Here, Hgoc makes the strange claim that a soldier is just a representative of his "land." In other words, soldiers on opposite sides of a war might not bear one another any hatred at all--they've merely been ordered to fight on behalf of their community, country, or city. Although Hgoc is trying to argue that soldiers are fighting against a country, not individual people, his argument has an ironic double-meaning. In a very practical sense, the American soldiers' *own* land is their enemy: powerful government officials have ordered them to fight against their will, risking their lives and mental health in the process. And on another level, Hgoc's claim speaks to the sense of futility behind the entire Vietnam War effort--there is no concrete enemy that can be defeated, but an entire "land" that works against the American soldiers on multiple levels.

Chapter 15 Quotes

Sarkin Aung Wan uncurled her legs and stood up.
"There is a way," she said.
The lieutenant kept studying his hands. The fingers trembled.
"The way in is the way out."
Li Van Hgoc laughed but the girl ignored it.
"The way in," she repeated, "is the way out. To flee Xa one must join it. To go home one must become a refugee."
"Riddles!" Li Van Hgoc spat. "Insane!"
Sarkin Aung Wan took Paul Berlin's hand. "Do you see?" she said. "You do need me."

Related Characters: Li Van Hgoc / Van, Sarkin Aung Wan (speaker), Paul Berlin, Lieutenant Corson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Sarkin, who is still trapped underground with Paul Berlin and the other soldiers, offers some ambiguous wisdom in this passage: "the way in is the way out." Sarkin thinks that she has a way of escaping the tunnels--even though Hgoc, who's been around for far longer, denies any possibility of escape.

It's hard to take Sarkin's words literally (by this point in the novel, we're so confused about the tunnels that we don't know what to believe). But on a symbolic level, Sarkin's pronouncement has a lot to say about the soldiers' state of mind. Traumatized by war, Berlin and his friends are trying to return "home"--both in the sense that they're trying to make it back to the U.S. in one piece, and in the sense that they're trying to preserve their sanity. Just as Sarkin implies, in order to savor one's home, one must first become an outsider. We see this through Paul Berlin's behavior: not too long ago, he was a frustrated young man, eager to leave his home and fight in the army--now, however, he's desperate to return to the homeland and state of innocence he left behind. In short, Sarkin's ideas reflect the soldiers' broken-down, yet strangely optimistic, worldview.

Chapter 16 Quotes

So in the hottest part of the afternoon, in a tiny hamlet called Thap Ro, they chose up teams according to squads. Eddie Lazzutti ripped the bottom out of a woman's wicker grain basket, shinnied up a tree, attached it with wire and slid down. No backboard, he said, but what the hell—it was still a war, wasn't it?

Related Characters: Eddie Lazzutti (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, O'Brien portrays the complexities of war, which include times of drudgery and even play. The American troops in Vietnam are bored; they're not sure if they'll ever see real combat. A soldier named Eddie--a friend of Paul Berlin's--builds a makeshift basketball court, using a woman's basket. The image of a "ripped" wicker basket foreshadows the barbaric crimes that Eddie and his peers will commit in the near future: although Eddie is relaxed and even bored here, O'Brien foreshadows that there's violence in his future.

The passage also shows soldiers again trying to survive, not in the sense of fighting, but in the sense of preserving their sanity. In no small part, the challenge of Vietnam is to remain sane in spite of all the traumatic events the soldiers witness. Basketball games are just one of the ways that the soldiers try to mitigate their fear and anxiety.

Then they were out of the water, regrouping, moving up the clay path into Trinh Son 2. Paul Berlin's head roared with quiet. Splitting—but he moved into the dark village. When Rudy Chassler hit the mine, the noise was muffled, almost fragile, but it was a relief for all of them.

Related Characters: Paul Berlin, Rudy Chassler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Early in their time in Vietnam, Paul and the other soldiers are bored and restless. Secretly, they want *something* to happen. One day, the soldier Rudy Chassler steps on a land mine, killing himself--and the other soldiers are secretly relieved. In some way, the tension of waiting and being

afraid is worse than actual violence and danger.

Disturbing as the passage is, it points to the anxieties of being a soldier in the Vietnam War. Many of the men and women who saw active duty in the conflict suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition which left them unable to cope with normal life after the war. Some of the soldiers who suffered from PTSD reported wanting to return to war, since Vietnam represented the last time when they felt they had some control over their lives. Berlin and his fellow soldiers define themselves in terms of war--an event like Rudy Chassler's death, as tragic as it might be, marks their only way of finding a kind of meaning and "resolution."

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ But who was he? Tender-complected, plump, large slanted eyes and flesh like paste. The images were fuzzy. Paul Berlin remembered separate things that refused to blend together. Whistling on ambush. Always chewing gum. The smiling. Fat, slow, going bald, young. Rapt, willing to do the hard stuff. And dumb. Dumb as milk. A case of gross tomfoolery.
Then he spotted Cacciato.
"That's him," he said. A bit of pastry clogged his throat. He looked again, swallowed—"That's him!"

Related Characters: Paul Berlin (speaker), Cacciato

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Berlin and the other soldiers have tracked Cacciato to the city of Mandalay. As Berlin walks through town, eating food, he's amazed to see Cacciato walking through the streets, dressed as a monk. Berlin describes Cacciato as a child, or even a baby--fat, bald, smiling, chewing, etc. Indeed, Cacciato seems completely innocent of the crimes he's witnessed in Vietnam: Paul and his fellow soldiers are men, but Cacciato is portrayed as something like a child, blissfully (and enviably) unaware of the horrors of war.

It's interesting that Berlin's recollections of Cacciato ("bald, young") arrive *before* he sees Cacciato, not immediately afterwards. Perhaps O'Brien is suggesting that Berlin is imagining Cacciato. Since it's already been implied that Berlin is imagining the entire mission to hunt down Cacciato, one could describe this passage as an imaginary encounter *within* an imaginary encounter. As the quest to track down Cacciato goes on, reality blurs to the point where every event feels like a dream, or a projection of Berlin's psychology.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ A few names were known in full, some in part, some not at all. No one cared. Except in clearly unreasonable cases, a soldier was generally called by the name he preferred, or by what he called himself, and no great effort was made to disentangle Christian names from surnames from nicknames. Stink Harris was known only as Stink Harris. If he had another name, no one knew it. Frenchie Tucker was Frenchie Tucker and nothing else. Some men came to the war with their names, others earned them. Buff won his name out of proven strength and patience and endurance. He had no first name and no last name, unless it was to call him Water Buffalo, a formality which was rare. Doc's name was so natural it went unnoticed; no one knew his first name and no one asked. What they were called was in some ways a measure of who they were, in other ways a measure of who they preferred to be. Cacciato, for example, was content to go by his family name; it was complete. Certain men carried no nicknames for the reverse of reasons that others did: because they refused them, because the nicknames did not stick, because no one cared.

Related Characters: Cacciato, Doc Peret, Water Buffalo / Buff, Frenchie Tucker, Stink Harris

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145-146

Explanation and Analysis

Here O'Brien describes the strange and fascinating culture surrounding nicknames in Vietnam. Almost every soldier has a nickname; furthermore, a soldiers' nickname is the only name he'll answer to, and the only name his peers are aware of. Thus, nobody knows who the "real" Water Buffalo is (outside of his Vietnam-self), and nobody seems to care.

The prevalence of nicknames among the soldiers suggests that everyone in the army has a second identity, distinct from their identity back in the U.S. Many of the soldiers treat the military as a "fresh start," so it makes sense that they would reject their old names along with their old lives. Furthermore, many of the soldiers will go on to "forget" their experiences in Vietnam, or pretend that they never happened--in a sense, they're rejecting their own names.

Cacciato's lack of a nickname might suggest his rare naivete and honesty. Unlike his peers, Cacciato seems to have

nothing to hide--he's the same person in Vietnam that he was in the U.S.

Chapter 24 Quotes

"Crazy," Oscar said. He kept wagging his head. "Over an' out."
It made Paul Berlin feel good. Like buddies. Genuine war buddies, he felt close to all of them. When they laughed, he laughed.

Related Characters: Oscar Johnson (speaker), Paul Berlin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, O'Brien shows how a young, inexperienced soldier bonds with his fellow troops. Paul Berlin and Oscar (a fellow soldier) have gone to take phone calls from their families back in the U.S. Berlin waits for Oscar, and when Oscar comes out of the phone room, he's looking very serious. Berlin then feels strangely close to Oscar--tragedy brings them together in sympathy and mutual respect.

O'Brien suggests that tragedy and trauma bring soldiers together, more than anything else. Paul and his fellow troops witness unspeakable tragedies. They're bound together for life by their experiences--they have nobody else to talk to about the things they've seen and done. Berlin has yet to fight in battle at this point, but he's already learning about how military bonding works--sadness is the "glue" that holds everyone together.

Chapter 29 Quotes

"There it is. The old man's suffering from an advanced case. Nostalgia, it comes from the Greek. I researched it: straight from the Greek. Algos means pain. Nostos means to return home. Nostalgia: the pain of returning home. And the ache that comes from thinking about it. See my drift? The old man's basic disease is homesickness. Nostalgia for the goddamned war, the army, the lifer's life. And the dysentery, the fever, it's just a symptom of the real sickness."
"So what do we do?"
"Time," Doc said. He put his glasses on. "It's the only antidote for nostalgia. Just give the man time."

Related Characters: Paul Berlin, Doc Peret (speaker), Lieutenant Corson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183-184

Explanation and Analysis

The soldiers arrive in the city of Tehran, but their supposed leader, Lieutenant Corson, is almost incapable of leading anyone: he's an older, weak man, and he's pining for a woman named Jolly, whom he met in India. Doc make a slightly different, and rather contradictory claim: that Corson is suffering from nostalgia, the fear of leaving the army behind altogether and the fear of returning home. So it's not clear what Corson's problem really is: if he's sad about leaving something behind, or if he's afraid of returning, or both.

The passage represents one of the closest links between O'Brien's novel and Homer's *Odyssey*, the Greek epic poem that's often cited as a major influence on this novel. O'Brien writes about a group of old veterans trying to reach home once again; in the same way, Homer wrote about Odysseus and his group of veterans trying to return to their island of Ithaca. Doc's explanation that Corson needs "time" might also suggest that there's no true cure for a soldier's PTSD--Doc can only hope that the soldiers learn to readjust to civilian life.

"Yes," the captain said, "running is also what the soldier thinks of, yes? He thinks of it often. He imagines himself running from battle. Dropping his weapon and turning and running and running and running, and never looking back, just running and running. Soldiers think of this. I know it. Yes? It is the soldier's thought above other thoughts."
"And?"
The man touched his moustache and smiled. "And purpose is what keeps him from running. Without purpose men will run. They will act out their dreams, and they will run and run, like animals in stampede. It is purpose that keeps men at their posts to fight. Only purpose."

Related Characters: Doc Peret, Captain Fahyi Rhallon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

The soldiers, still in Tehran, cross paths with a suspicious

young Iranian military officer, Captan Fahyi Rhallon. The Captain asks the soldiers how it's possible for them to be traveling through Tehran without passports. Doc claims that he and his friends are allowed to travel to track down Cacciato, due to some obscure stipulations of the Geneva Codes. It's not entirely clear if Rhallon buys Doc's explanation or not--i.e., if he's being serious or if he's toying with the troops.

Whether or not Rhallon is being sincere with the soldiers, his speech about running and "purpose" echoes the paradox of the soldiers' mission to track down Cacciato. As we know by now, the soldiers are certainly running from their active duty in Vietnam--going to Paris sounds much better than fighting and dying for no discernible cause, after all--and yet they're also on a mission on behalf of the U.S. military. In short, the soldiers are both loyal and disobedient to their commanders. Rhallon emphasizes purpose at the expense of freedom, yet the soldiers have found freedom from Vietnam *because* of the purpose their commanding officer has given them.

Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ There was great quiet. A very noisy quiet, Paul Berlin thought. He felt Oscar staring at him from across the room—a long, hard stare—as if to accuse. As if to say, Your fuckin dream, man. Now do something.
After a moment Doc Peret sighed. "Well," he said, "I guess it's time for some diplomatic pressure. By Uncle Sam, I mean. Time for Sammy to step in on our behalf."
The captain shook his head. "Sadly," he said, "that will not be possible. Certainly not productive. As I say, your government does not know you. Or chooses not to. In either case, I fear the outcome is the same."

Related Characters: Doc Peret, Captain Fahyi Rhallon (speaker), Oscar Johnson, Paul Berlin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228-229

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Captain Rhallon--newly suspicious of Berlin and his fellow troops traveling through Iran--has the troops arrested and sentenced to be executed. Rhallon is as calm as ever, but this time there's no ambiguity in the air of menace he gives off: he's going to let his new "friends" be killed. And this time, Doc's bluffs of knowledge and control don't work--Rhallon knows full-well that Doc is lying about traveling through the country via the Geneva Codes.

Even at this dark moment in the text, there's a strong element of fantasy. Oscar stares as Paul Berlin as if to reference Paul's "dream"--a clear reminder of the possibly fictional nature of the entire story (it's later suggested that Paul is dreaming his mission as he sits on the beach). Rhallon's words, for all their menace, have some truth in them: the soldiers' government doesn't care about them. In fact, the U.S. government sent its soldiers into Vietnam to die--the government wanted its men to further its own causes in Vietnam, not escape to Paris.

Chapter 34 Quotes

❝ Oscar lifted the grenade from his belt. It was the new kind, shaped like a baseball, seamless, easy to handle and easy to throw. He held it as if judging its weight. "See my point? It's preservation. That's all it is—it's selffuckin-preservation."

Related Characters: Oscar Johnson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

Sidney Martin, the commander of Paul Berlin and the other troops, has ordered his troops to "clear" a bunker--a highly dangerous activity that's already resulted in two lives lost. One by one, the soldiers refuse to put their own lives in danger. Martin writes down everyone's name, promising to report them for insubordination, and then he goes into the hole himself. While he's down there, Oscar and his peers seem to be seriously considering murdering Martin.

On the surface, Oscar's inclination to kill a fellow soldier seems barbaric, and yet he has a legitimate point--that doing so would protect his own life, and the lives of his fellow soldiers. Being a "good" soldier in Vietnam means voluntarily endangering one's own life. We already knew that there's a big difference between pursuing one's own peace and happiness and following orders (going after Cacciato is insubordinate, after all), and yet it's not until this scene that we see the stark conflict between survival and duty that Paul and his fellow troops must face.

Chapter 36 Quotes

❝ So now he ran. A miracle, he thought, and he closed his eyes and made it happen.
And then a getaway car—why not? It was a night of miracles, and he was a miracle man. So why not? Yes, a car. Cacciato pointed at it, shouted something, then disappeared.

Related Characters: Paul Berlin (speaker), Cacciato

Related Themes:

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

In this dreamlike sequence of events, Paul and his fellow troops manage to break out of their prison cell in Tehran and make a run for it. No explanation is offered for how they're able to escape (they have a grenade, but it's not clear where they got it). After a certain point, O'Brien purposefully doesn't even try to make the scene seem realistic--for example, Paul seems to imagine a getaway car, and then sees one in real life. We're reminded that the entire episode--and the entire hunt for Cacciato--might be Paul's daydream in the first place, meaning that his "inventing" of a car is only one tiny part of the story he's dreamed up.

Chapter 38 Quotes

Like a daughter caring for an ailing father, she encouraged him to eat and exercise, coddled him, scolded him, gently coaxed him into showing some concern for his own welfare and that of his men. The lieutenant seemed deeply attached to her. It was an unspoken thing. They would sometimes spend whole days together, walking the decks or throwing darts or simply sitting in the sun.
When the lieutenant showed signs of the old withdrawal, Sarkin Aung Wan would remind him of his responsibilities. "A leader must lead," she would say. "Without leadership, a leader is nothing."

Related Characters: Sarkin Aung Wan (speaker), Lieutenant Corson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

As Sarkin, Paul, and the other troops get closer and closer to Paris, their commander, Lieutenant Corson, gets more and more healthy. In war, Corson was sickly and ineffectual, but away from battle he seems to have regained his strength. Corson's improving illustrates the personal toll that war takes on a human life, whether one lives or dies. The Lieutenant has fought in many wars, and over a lifetime of battle, he's accumulated more weakness and sadness than most people could bear.

It's also important, of course, to note that it's Sarkin who cares for Corson. Even though Corson is a symbol of destruction and aggression in Sarkin's native country of Vietnam, Sarkin still treats him with kindness.

Chapter 39 Quotes

Not knowing the language, they did not know the people. They did not know what the people loved or respected or feared or hated. They did not recognize hostility unless it was patent, unless it came in a form other than language; the complexities of tone and tongue were beyond them. Dinkese, Stink Harris called it: monkey chatter, bird talk. Not knowing the language, the men did not know whom to trust. Trust was lethal. They did not know false smiles from true smiles, or if in Quang Ngai a smile had the same meaning it had in the States.

Related Characters: Stink Harris

Related Themes:

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Paul and the troops begin their active duty in Vietnam. Right away, they're sent into Quang Ngai, a town that's rumored to be housing Vietcong soldiers. As the soldiers quickly realize, the people of the town can't be trusted easily. O'Brien never reveals if, in fact, the townspeople *are* friendly to the U.S. soldiers or not--the scene is narrated from the perspective of the troops, who have been trained to fear the people of Vietnam, and partly for good reason.

O'Brien doesn't excuse the evident racism of the soldiers--here, for instance, Stink treats the Vietnamese civilians like animals, who don't even have a proper language. So whether or not Stink is right to fear the Vietnamese (and it's certainly possible that they're working with the Vietcong, as some civilians were during the Vietnam War), we should recognize that he's not making an effort to know the civilians--he assumes they're animals and treats them as such. (It's worth remembering that the only Vietnamese civilians in the novel are portrayed as helpful, loving people.)

They knew the old myths about Quang Ngai—tales passed down from old-timer to newcomer—but they did not know which stories to believe. Magic, mystery, ghosts and incense, whispers in the dark, strange tongues and strange smells, uncertainties never articulated in war stories, emotion squandered on ignorance. They did not know good from evil.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 270-271

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, O'Brien describes how the American soldiers interact with the people of Quang Ngai. The soldiers have been told that some of the people in Quang Ngai may have worked with Vietcong soldiers to kill American troops--but it's impossible to know which people, if any, did so.In the confused environment of Vietnam, the American soldiers don't know who to trust. They want to protect themselves, and so they think of every Quang Ngai civilian as a potential threat--in other words, they can't distinguish good and evil.

As the passage suggests, the American troops in Vietnam are confronted with a series of moral tests in which their loyalty to one another is pitted against their desire to get along with the Vietnamese civilians. As we've already seen, Paul and his friends are sometimes forced to make decisions with no "good" option--the savagery of the war forces them to do evil without calling it evil. To take this idea even further, O'Brien seems to suggest that in wartime there *is*no clear divide between good and evil--everything is vague, fantastical, horrifying, and instinctual.

Chapter 40 Quotes

❝ It would not have ended that way: cops and customs agents, defeat, arrested like wetbacks at the wharves of Western Civilization, captured within mindshot of the lighted Propylaea and Parthenon, nothing fulfilled, no answers, the whole expedition throttled just as it approached the promise of a rightful end. It wouldn't have happened that way. And it didn't.

Related Characters: Paul Berlin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

Paul and his fellow soldiers are about to get arrested around Greece, and it seems that their long journey has finally come to an end. But just when we've given up all hope, Paul seems to "intervene" in the story, and he decides that "it would not have ended" in Greece--and thus he decides that the story is going to keep going.

The passage exemplifies a "deus ex machina" moment, in which a happy ending arises out of surprising, unexpected circumstances. The fantastical, self-referential quality of the passage reinforces that the entire story is seemingly being imagined by Paul, rather than lived out by real characters in the "history" of the novel. Paul refuses to allow a sad ending in his own fantasy. (At the same time, it's a mark of how miserable Paul's circumstances in Vietnam have become that it's so hard for him to imagine a happy ending for his own daydream.) In general, Paul--perhaps still trapped in Vietnam--seems to crave escape from his situation, and so he imagines an over-the-top story of the ultimate escape.

❝ Shrugging, glancing again into the mirror, the girl opened the door and stepped out. She watched while Oscar dumped out her suitcase and sleeping bag. She never stopped smiling.
Eddie drove, Oscar rode shotgun.
"You know," Doc said wistfully, "sometimes I do feel a little guilt."

Related Characters: Doc Peret (speaker), Eddie Lazzutti, Oscar Johnson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a young "hippie" woman helps the soldiers travel across the country into Paris. In spite of the woman's kindness, the troops treat her cruelly, taking her car and throwing her things on the ground without any care. Strangely, the woman continues to smile. Perhaps O'Brien intends this character to represent the innocence and foolishness of the youth movement's response to Vietnam. In the 60s and 70s, there were millions of young men and women who opposed the war in Vietnam. Often, these people treated American soldiers as mere pawns (just like the government they were opposing did)--they were more interested in arguing against the sociopolitical reasons for the war itself than they were in empathizing with individual soldiers. By the same token, the woman who drives the troops seems to respect the "idea" of fighting in the war, but also seems to make no effort to understand Paul and his friends individually.

Doc's claim that he feels guilty is meant be taken ironically--he seems to be referring to the young woman whose car he's just taken, when in fact he should be feeling guilty about the crimes he's committed in Vietnam--a morally complex issue that the young woman herself clearly doesn't

understand.

Chapter 43 Quotes

❝ Strangers would buy drinks. Policemen would smile and shake their heads. Money was never a problem, passports were never required.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

Once they reach Paris, the soldiers have no problem surviving--they have plenty of money and their passports are never requested. In short, Paris is everything Paul and his friends dreamed it could be: a peaceful city in which they can be happy and carefree forever.

It's notable that Paris doesn't offer the soldiers any of the problems that previous cities did--unlike in Tehran, there are no troublesome officers asking for identification. If we're meant to believe that the soldiers' stay in Paris is a product of Paul's imagination (and by this point in the novel it's hard to imagine any other explanation for so many implausible twists and turns in the plot), then perhaps the absence of danger or obstacles in Paris is meant to signal that Paul has finally succeeded in freeing his mind from the realities of war: he's finally gotten to the point where he can daydream about peace and contentment instead of just more violence.

Chapter 44 Quotes

❝ Spec Four Paul Berlin: I am asking for a break from violence. But I am also asking for a positive commitment. You yearn for normality—an average house in an average town, a garden, perhaps a wife, the chance to grow old. Realize these things. Give up this fruitless pursuit of Cacciato. Forget him. Live now the dream you have dreamed. See Paris and enjoy it. Be happy. It is possible. It is within reach of a single decision."

Related Characters: Sarkin Aung Wan (speaker), Cacciato, Paul Berlin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 318

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sarkin Aung Wan asks her lover, Paul Berlin, to stay with her in Paris. Paul has reached a cross-roads: thus far, he could always pretend that he was following military orders by pursuing Cacciato to Paris, even when it was clear that he was really going to Paris to escape the war. Now, Paul and his friends are about to be chased out of the city: the authorities have finally caught up with them, and they know Paul is a deserter. Sarkin asks Paul to stay behind with her, risking arrest but also possibly gaining true happiness.

One should keep in mind that Sarkin might be an opportunist, more interested in having money and a nice apartment than in Paul himself. But in a sense, Sarkin is exactly right. Paul isn't just following his orders; he's *choosing* to have a difficult life. He obeys authorities and goes with the group, even when doing so makes him miserable and endangers his life.

Chapter 46 Quotes

❝ "I guess it's better this way," the old man finally said. "There's worse things can happen. There's plenty of worse things."
"True enough, sir."
"And who knows? He might make it. He might do all right." The lieutenant's voice was flat like the land. "Miserable odds, but—"
"But maybe."
"Yes," the lieutenant said. "Maybe so."

Related Characters: Paul Berlin, Lieutenant Corson (speaker), Cacciato

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 336

Explanation and Analysis

In this final scene, a flashback to the beginning of the novel, Paul and Lieutenant Corson (who will eventually become rivals for Sarkin's love), discuss the possibility that Cacciato--who's just run away from the army--will succeed in reaching Paris. Strangely, both men agree that Cacciato very well might succeed in his quest, unlikely as it seems.

In a way, Cacciato's disappearance is meant to symbolize the soldiers' desire to survive the war in Vietnam--if Cacciato can make it all the way to Paris unharmed, then perhaps Paul, Corson, and the others can make it back to

the U.S. sane and in one piece, too. The scene also reminds us that the novel we've just read might be the product of Paul's imagination--perhaps Cacciato is killed early on in his journey, but Paul continues imagining that Cacciato makes it away from the war and completes his unlikely odyssey to Paris. In the end, O'Brien leaves us with a cautious optimism--perhaps it's possible for the soldiers of this bloody, brutal war to survive while also maintaining their sanity--and perhaps it's hope, imagination, and fantasy that helps them do so.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The chapter begins, "it was a bad time." A man named Billy Boy Watkins has died of fright in the middle of a battle, as have several others: Sidney Martin, Ready Mix, Bernie Lynn, and more. Some of the people who have survived the battle (which is, for the time being, not described or named) suffer from serious trauma, and some think that animals are attacking them. The soldiers—the narrator does not say which—travel from village to village, always finding the same things. In September, the soldiers experience the horrors of the monsoons, and violent storms leave everyone cold and sickly. Some of the soldiers compare the rain to that of their homes. One soldier, Oscar Johnson, says the rain reminds him of Detroit, and notes that rain provides the best background for "rape an' lootin'." In general, the soldiers find ways to joke about their pain: they joke about Billy Boy's death, about the rain, and about their commander dying of dysentery.

In the opening paragraphs of the novel, O'Brien sets a tone of surreal, almost hallucinatory violence mixed with oppressive dullness. The soldiers are fighting a long, brutal war (the Vietnam War—a fact that won't explicitly be acknowledged until halfway through the book). Survival isn't only a matter of defending oneself from enemy soldiers—none are even mentioned in this section—but it's equally a matter of preserving one's sanity. The soldiers who survive must come up with "coping mechanisms" to make sense of the horror they've seen around them. One important coping mechanism, here and elsewhere in the book, is humor: the soldiers try to transform pain into comedy.

In October, one of the soldiers, a man named Cacciato, "left the war." The other soldiers try to understand what this means, and where he's gone. Lieutenant Corson, the leader of the soldiers, is so old and weak that he's developed a bad case of dysentery. As a result, he barely realizes that Cacciato, one of his soldiers, has departed. A soldier named Doc Peret tells Corson that Cacciato has gone to **Paris**. Corson seems to understand what Doc is saying, since he repeats the word "Paris," pronouncing it "Paree."

Although O'Brien has yet to explicitly state that we're in Vietnam, he assumes that we know the general setting, and conveys the sense of confused, "blind leading the blind" chaos that we usually associate with the Vietnam War. The notion of a lieutenant who barely knows where he is, and certainly isn't up to leading his men, implies that there is no order or structure here—everyone is equally terrified, and equally helpless.

Corson calls Cacciato's friend, Paul Berlin, to discuss Cacciato's disappearance. Corson asks Berlin if it's true that Cacciato has gone to **Paris**, and Berlin replies that it is. Cacciato, he adds, is a fool—a simple-minded idiot who can't accomplish anything on his own. Cacciato learned that Paris is about 8,000 miles away from where the soldiers are stationed, and has decided to walk there. He plans to walk through Laos, then Burma, and on through the Middle East until he arrives in Paris. As Lieutenant Corson listens, he only comments that Cacciato is going AWOL (a military term meaning "absent without leave"). Corson asks Berlin about Cacciato's squad—which consists of Berlin, Doc, Eddie Lazzutti, Stink, Oscar, and Harold Murphy. Corson tells Berlin that this squad, squad three, is going after Cacciato.

In this scene—basically the exposition for the plot of the entire novel—we recognize that Cacciato's plan to travel from Vietnam to Paris is absurd. And yet even here, before we know much about the soldiers in the squad, it's implied that the soldiers are strangely envious of Cacciato—just like Cacciato, they want to leave the horrors of Vietnam behind. The notion of a journey from Vietnam to Paris suggests a transition from war to peace (historically, Paris is the city in which nations pursue peace accords—the Revolutionary War, the Vietnam War, and World War I were all officially settled in the city). In this way, Cacciato's decision to walk to Paris suggests his longing for peace—the same thing any soldier in Vietnam would want.

Squad three proceeds to hunt down Cacciato. They make their way through the mountains and forests. Before too long, Paul Berlin spots Cacciato in the distance. He can see that Cacciato is tired and lonely-looking. The figure in the distance is clearly Cacciato—Berlin and his friends can tell, because Cacciato has a large, round figure, and looks strangely young, as if he hasn't yet achieved manhood. As he watches, Berlin recalls Cacciato looking through an old atlas, plotting out his walk to **Paris**.

Cacciato will remain a mystery to us throughout this novel, and O'Brien conveys his otherworldliness early on. Cacciato seems like a spirit or a vision, rather than a flesh-and-blood human being. He's described as seeming unusually young—an impression that goes along with his seemingly innocent, oblivious desire to simply run away from violence and seek peace.

Although the third squad sees Cacciato far ahead, they haven't caught him yet. They climb through high mountains. Eventually, they reach a spot where Cacciato has spent the night. There, they notice that Cacciato has left behind the atlas he'd been looking through before he deserted the army. Although most of the atlas has been burnt, Corson notices that Cacciato has drawn a red line across the pages of the map. The red line extends off the page, into foreign territory. Corson can't believe that Cacciato would try to make such a dangerous journey.

Cacciato plays the part of a will-o-the wisp—a mysterious spirit, luring others through dangerous territory. In pursuing Cacciato, Corson and his troops are placing their own lives in danger. No explanation is given for why it's so important to track down Cacciato—but this echoes the feeling that many soldiers had about the Vietnam War itself. It was never really made clear to them just why *they were fighting and dying in foreign jungles.*

As Corson studies the pages of Cacciato's atlas, Doc suggests that they let Cacciato go ahead, rather than endanger their own lives by trying to track him down. Doc insists that eventually Cacciato will see how foolish his plan is, and turn back. After much thought, however, Lieutenant Corson disagrees with Doc, and he orders his men to continue searching for Cacciato.

Once again, no explanation is offered for why Corson insists upon continuing to hunt Cacciato. Corson is portrayed as weary and ill, almost in a trance-like state, and he latches onto this seemingly meaningless quest as a way to keep a sense of purpose.

The soldiers continue chasing Cacciato through the mountains. By this point, Cacciato is well aware that he's being followed—as he climbs up the mountain, he looks back and sees his former squad. Lieutenant Corson mutters, "I'm a sick, sick man," as he and his soldiers proceed. It begins to rain, very hard. Despite the sound of thunder, Oscar shouts to Cacciato. Cacciato turns, and seems to shout something back, but nobody can hear him. Paul Berlin pulls a pair of binoculars out of his bag and points them at Cacciato. Berlin realizes that Cacciato is miming a chicken, flapping his arms like wings. Berlin reports that Cacciato is mouthing a word: "Goodbye." The soldiers then witness Cacciato "flying" through the air. He's clearly just learning how to fly, but he's flying nonetheless.

It's interesting to consider the fact that, while the troops are constantly criticizing Cacciato for being a fool and an idiot, they never attack Corson for his mental limitations, even though they would appear to be much more dangerous. (It's not exactly clear if Cacciato is supposed to be mentally handicapped, or if the other soldiers are calling him an idiot because they resent him.) Cacciato suddenly learning to "fly" is the first surprising introduction of the fantastical into the narrative. The tone overall is disjointed and almost surreal, but this scene introduces a real element of the impossible. Cacciato now seems even more like an otherworldly figure, and the novel seems more like "magical realism."

Night falls on the mountains, and the soldiers make camp. Lieutenant Corson vomits from dysentery, but continues to lead the men. He uses his radio to tell his commanders that he and his men are in "pursuit of the enemy." Late that night—around 4 AM—the soldiers, unable to sleep, sit around talking about Cacciato. Paul Berlin tells Doc Peret that he hopes Cacciato keeps moving and escapes from the army for good.

As the soldiers proceed through Vietnam, the truth becomes more and more apparent: the soldiers want *Cacciato to escape from his duties as a soldier. In part, this is because the soldiers sympathize with Cacciato, but it's also because they themselves want to escape Vietnam.*

The night proceeds, and Paul Berlin finds himself thinking about Cacciato. He imagines Cacciato being murdered: his skull exploding, throwing blood everywhere. Then, he imagines "a miracle"—Cacciato succeeding in walking to **Paris**. Berlin turns to Doc, and mentions that Cacciato "did some pretty brave things." Doc nods, and mentions some of these acts of "bravery"—Cacciato "shot that kid," and saved a woman from a bunker.

It's important to note that as the novel progresses, O'Brien will further blur the distinction between Berlin's imagination and the real world. For the time being, however, the distinction seems clear: the images of Cacciato's skull exploding are confined to Berlin's own consciousness. The symbol of Paris comes up again and again, connected to the idea of just how possible it would be for Cacciato to walk there. Paris seems like an impossible ideal, but it is important for Berlin to keep that dream alive.

The next day, the squad marches through the "unpolluted country" beyond the mountains. Paul Berlin secretly enjoys the silent, steady marching—it's certainly preferable to his usual duties as a soldier. As he walks, he wonders if it might not be possible that Cacciato could make it to **Paris**—perhaps there's a one in a million chance. The squad loses sight of Cacciato, and they don't even find areas where he's been resting. Then, after nearly five days of marching, the squad finds some of Cacciato's possessions: a vest, a bayonet, an ID card, and an ammo pouch. The soldiers can't understand why Cacciato would leave these things behind—he's alerted his pursuers to his location, making it easier for them to track him down. Stink Harris mutters that Cacciato is "a rockhead." As the search proceeds, the soldiers approach enemy territory. Eventually, they're only a few miles from "the border." If Cacciato crosses this border, the soldiers agree, "It's bye-bye Cacciato."

The details of the soldiers' pursuit of Cacciato have the elements of a fairy tale: Cacciato seems to be leaving pieces of evidence in his path, like breadcrumbs in the Hansel and Gretel story. This "fairy tale" tone goes along with the fundamental absurdity of the premise of Cacciato's "mission"—it would be, after all, nearly impossible for a soldier to travel from Vietnam to Paris at all, much less without being caught for desertion. At this point in the novel, it's not yet clear how far Cacciato's journey will go on: the Vietnamese border is the first of the many barriers to travel that Cacciato and the soldiers will have to face. Part of the novel is this Odyssey*-like journey to reach an idealized destination, but O'Brien complicates this structure greatly, as we will see.*

After six days of pursuit, the squad sees Cacciato walking ahead in the distance. Cacciato looks surprisingly calm and casual—in fact, he looks like a civilian. Lieutenant Corson orders Stink to a fire a shot in Cacciato's general direction—the goal being to scare Cacciato, not to kill him. Stink fires, but Cacciato continues to look calm.

Again and again, O'Brien describes Cacciato as being strangely, eerily calm. This again adds to the sense of Cacciato as otherworldly or superhuman—a kind of dream figure the soldiers are pursuing. All these seemingly fantastical elements ultimately point towards the revelation, at the novel's end, that this whole journey towards Paris is playing out in Berlin's traumatized imagination.

The soldiers march toward Cacciato. Suddenly, Stink Harris looks down: he's "tripped" a wire. Quickly, the soldiers jump to the ground, knowing that there will be an enormous explosion. Paul Berlin crouches on the ground, closing his eyes and waiting for the inevitable "Boom." But no explosion comes. Instead, there is a hissing sound, and Lieutenant Corson shouts that the squad has triggered a smoke bomb. Bright red smoke engulfs the soldiers. They can't see anything. Nevertheless, all seven soldiers manage to crawl to safety, gasping and coughing. As Lieutenant Corson crawls away, he mutters, "Had us, could've had us all, he could've."

The fact that the bomb is a smoke bomb, rather than a land mine, is, it should be noted, an incredible coincidence. The soldiers are lucky to be alive—the first of many "close shaves" they'll encounter in the novel. O'Brien reminds us that the soldiers are very lucky to have gotten as far as they've gone—fantastically lucky, as it will turn out. The confusion and fear of the smoke bomb is also like a microcosm for the world of the Vietnam War itself.

A few hours later, Oscar Johnson is returning to the squad, carrying a white flag. Johnson has gone to meet with Cacciato, in order to negotiate the terms of Cacciato's surrender. Johnson has told Cacciato the truth: Cacciato has intentionally endangered the lives of his fellow soldiers, a crime for which he could easily be court-marshaled in the United States. As such, he should surrender, rather than make his situation any worse. Cacciato, Johnson reports, has refused to surrender. He cheerfully apologized for the smoke, and asked Johnson how the squad is "holding up." Johnson asks Lieutenant Corson, "Why not let him go, sir?" Corson only replies that he needs "rest."

In this section, O'Brien introduces the legalistic side of duty and desertion. According to this perspective, Cacciato is a criminal because he's refused to fight on behalf of his government, and has disobeyed his commanding officers, Corson and Johnson. And yet these crimes seem hilarious petty when compared to the crimes of the Vietnam War itself—what's desertion next to the My Lai massacre? (See Background Info.) Moreover, Corson seems increasingly unstable, throwing any and all of his orders—including the order that Cacciato remain a soldier—into question.

That night, Paul Berlin dreams about Cacciato walking through the country. He still wants to believe that Cacciato could succeed in his plan to walk to **Paris**. "Yes, it could be done," he tells himself. Suddenly, it begins to rain.

Berlin becomes increasingly adamant in his belief that Cacciato can make it to Paris. He seemingly does so because he needs something *to believe in—something to inspire him to survive.*

The next morning, the rain has subsided. Berlin wakes up and sees a small fire in the distance—Cacciato is cooking himself breakfast. Lieutenant Corson wakes up and announces, "let's do it." Eddie, Oscar, and Harold Murphy proceed towards Cacciato, while Corson and the other soldiers stay behind, "to block a retreat." They plan to arrest Cacciato. It is still very dark, and Berlin fires a bright green flare into the sky. Back with Corson, Doc imagines that the soldiers are celebrating the New Year—1968, the Year of the Pig.

For not the last time in the novel, O'Brien ends a section with a "cliffhanger." He toys with our sense of anticipation throughout the novel, calling into question how "realistic" any of the events in the book really are. The hallucinatory description of this scene, in hindsight, seemingly echoes Berlin's trauma—this is the night on which he (presumably) shot Cacciato.

CHAPTER 2

An unspecified amount of time after the events of the previous chapter, Paul Berlin lies on the ground, thinking about Cacciato. He is sitting in a large tower that overlooks the South China Sea, and it's a little before midnight. Nearby, he sees other soldiers, such as Doc, Eddie, and Oscar, sleeping peacefully.

This sudden change of scene and time, combined with Cacciato's earlier "flight," reintroduces the idea of the fantastical into the novel. Clearly this will not be a straightforward narrative—the events are disjointed, and what is really "real" is always in question. With this structure, O'Brien echoes the effects of the trauma and confusion of war.

Berlin thinks back on his squad's pursuit of Cacciato, and tries to understand what has become of Cacciato. Only a short time ago, he and his fellow soldiers advanced on Cacciato, firing flares high into the air. What happened next is left unclear, and Berlin seems unable to wrap his mind around it. He thinks of Doc, who recently theorized a strange medical condition in Berlin: he has an "overabundance of biles." Biles, a strange chemical in the human body, produce a soothing feeling, much like the one Berlin seems to feel.

Doc Peret is the military doctor, and the squad's resident scientist, But his version of science doesn't seem very scientific. The theory of biles is basically a medieval idea, and has no basis in modern medicine. Yet Doc's pseudoscience seems appropriate for the world of the novel, where seemingly nothing is verifiable, and the characters must make up stories just to survive and preserve their sanity.

Despite Doc's theories, Berlin is terrified. Berlin watches the waves crash on the beach below the tower, and tries to understand what has happened to Cacciato. He wonders where Cacciato has gone, and how he's managed to elude capture for so long.

This chapter is dreamlike and seemingly disconnected from the events of the last chapter, and its conclusion provides no answers. This is O'Brien's intention—he wants us to feel disoriented, as a soldier would.

CHAPTER 3

Two days after the events of the previous chapter, the squad is walking through the jungle, again trying to capture Cacciato. They've been moving slowly, in single file, looking for any hints of Cacciato's presence. As the group proceeds, rations are growing sparse, and soon they'll have no more food. Berlin fantasizes about eating delicious American food and drinking Coke.

O'Brien reinforces the futility of the squad's mission to capture Cacciato in this section—by devoting their time and resources to hunting down Cacciato, the soldiers are risking their own lives, running dangerously low on food and potable water.

Doc studies his map and talks to Lieutenant Corson. He shows Corson the group's progress: they're nearing the neighboring country of Laos—a dangerous area. Harold Murphy, who carries the squad's "**big rifle**," mutters that the soldiers should let Cacciato go, rather than risk their own lives. Lieutenant Corson ignores Murphy and motions for his soldiers to continue marching toward Laos. As the soldiers continue, Paul Berlin becomes extremely tired. He falls back to walk alongside Oscar Johnson, his fellow soldier. Johnson mutters that there's no way Cacciato walked the way they're walking now. Johnson adds that Corson—who's ordering them to risk their lives—is clearly in poor health.

As we learn more about the squad, it becomes clearer that it's not a streamlined, well-organized group, but a rag-tag, rebellious group, in which no two people—except for Berlin and Cacciato—get along. Oscar Johnson, the second-in-command to Corson, recognizes (perhaps correctly) that Corson is in no condition to lead men through a jungle—he might not even be in the right state of mind to be in Vietnam at all. Cacciato's desertion exposes just how fragile the connections uniting the rest of the squad are

After many more miles of walking, the soldiers arrive at a vast river, which marks the border between their country and Laos. There are no bridges over the river, but Corson orders his man to wade across it. They do so, slowly and carefully. To their surprise, the river is shallow and easy to cross. For the next six days, the soldiers march through Laos. They pass by villages, some of which are deserted. Their days are grueling—they wake up at daybreak, march until the mid-afternoon, and then, after a brief rest, march until the sun sets. Everyone finds the march exhausting, but especially Lieutenant Corson.

In this small but important moment, the soldiers reach a seemingly difficult obstacle—a large, intimidating river—and then conquer it easily. In dramatic terms, this is rather unsatisfying, but O'Brien is playing with our expectations on purpose. The pattern of an insurmountable obstacle followed by an increasingly fantastical solution will continue, creating an odd, dreamlike rhythm to the story of the soldiers' journey, and adding to our sense that these events are the product of imagination, not reality.

One afternoon, the soldiers are marching over a small creek when Lieutenant Corson collapses. He's been suffering from dysentery lately, and hasn't been dealing with the march well. Doc examines Corson and concludes that "the old man's had it." The soldiers drag Corson to a nearby tree, and spend the rest of the day sitting with him. Corson falls asleep, and it's not clear if he'll survive the night or not.

In this scene, O'Brien seems poised to break another basic rule of drama—eliminating an important character before we get to know the character well. Berlin is portrayed as a young, inexperienced soldier, and Corson seems like his opposite—nihilistic and apathetic, clearly broken by his experiences in Vietnam.

The remaining soldiers of squad three decide to have a meeting to determine the fate of their mission. Harold Murphy is among the first to speak up—he argues that they should turn back, rather than risk their lives hunting down one deserter. Oscar Johnson disagrees—he argues that the soldiers have responsibilities to their lieutenant, and shouldn't ignore these so readily. Murphy points out that without Corson to testify, the soldiers could easily be accused of desertion themselves—after all, they've marched into a foreign country, seemingly along the same path that Cacciato took when he went AWOL.

In the absence of a strong, central authority—Lieutenant Corson—the other members of the squad argue among themselves. There's no secret about the fact that the soldiers' actions resemble desertion: they're leaving Vietnam, supposedly in search of Cacciato, but leaving nonetheless. All along it's suggested that the soldiers are eager to go after Cacciato because *they want to desert: they'll take any excuse to leave the horror of the war, although they won't admit this.*

The soldiers have listened to "speeches," and now it's time for them to vote on what to do next. One by one, they cast ballots by writing down their decisions on pieces of paper. Paul Berlin votes to continue searching for Cacciato, winning the vote for the "go-aheads." The next morning, the soldiers discover that Harold Murphy has left, and left behind his **big rifle**. Oscar Johnson picks up the rifle, and the soldiers continue west into Laos without Murphy.

The big rifle, one of the more overt symbols in the novel, can be said to mean several things. It's a large, conspicuous "phallic symbol"—a symbol of its bearer's power and masculinity. By disobeying orders, Harold Murphy is relinquishing his place in the military, the ultimate masculine institution—thus, he gives up his gun. In another sense, the big rifle is a burden—a cross to be dragged through the jungles of Vietnam. Murphy's choice to give up the rifle is his way of trying to escape his enormous burden as a seasoned soldier.

CHAPTER 4

Paul Berlin thinks about his recent past as a soldier. He was first assigned to Chu Lai's Combat Center on June 3, 1968. There, a barber shaved his head, and a "bored master sergeant" delivered an uninspiring speech. Berlin was then confined to a small area and warned never to leave it for fear of endangering his life.

Even at the beginning of Paul Berlin's period in the military he's conscious that the leadership is uninspired, and uninspiring. There's not even an attempt to excite him—the drill sergeant doesn't believe in the things he's saying, and neither does Berlin.

One morning during Berlin's time at the Combat Center, he was marched to the bleachers, along with the other soldiers in training. A blank-faced corporal walked out and proceeded to stand there, silently, for the next hour. After the hour ended, the corporal explained that he'd just given the soldiers their first lesson on "how to survive this shit."

One would expect a corporal to give soldiers at least a little information about the goals of their mission in Vietnam—something to inspire them and help them remain optimistic. Instead, the corporal gives Berlin the bare bones—how to survive both the violence and the crushing boredom.

The soldiers in training at Chu Lai participated in mock-drills, in which they were ordered to search and destroy villages. Berlin took these drills very seriously, since he thought he could die if he wasn't well trained. He also spent long hours practicing "grenade training," survival methods, etc. Berlin thinks of himself as a sensible, normal person. As a result, he hates being called a fool, an imbecile, a creep, and the other names his drill sergeants shout at him. He writes a letter to his father in which he asks his father to look up where Chu Lai is—because he's "a little lost."

Berlin is a cautious soldier, motivated, above all else, by his desire for survival. He thinks that he has the power to take control over his own life—in other words, he doesn't yet realize that in Vietnam, soldiers simply don't have much control over their fates. The most random, unpredictable events—exploding bombs, trip wires, etc.—can end a life at any given time. The value Berlin places in his own competency will be revealed to be very important, when he goes so far as to invent an alternate reality in order to avoid thinking about his mistakes.

After a week of training, the soldiers are assigned to their units. Paul Berlin is assigned to the 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry, 198 Infantry Brigade. For every one soldier, he learns, there are 12 "support" people—doctors, computer scientists, dentists, mapmakers, etc.

In real life, Tim O'Brien was assigned to this same battalion. This doesn't mean that Berlin is a stand-in for O'Brien himself—but it does suggest that O'Brien is writing from his own experiences, and perhaps even writing this fictional novel (as Berlin will reimagine events) as a way of understanding and coping with the chaos of Vietnam.

Berlin remembers being a child and spending time camping with his father. His father, affectionately nicknamed Big Fox or Big Bear, was a strong, capable man, but Berlin had trouble with their various camping activities—rowing, sack racing, etc. Once, Berlin became too sick to continue camping, and his father drove him home and gave him hamburgers and root beer. He and his father were "pals forever," Berlin thinks.

It's a common motif of coming-of-age stories that the young, callow protagonist has a bad relationship with his father. This is important because without a strong father, the (presumably male) character doesn't know what to become. *Berlin's relationship with his father isn't yet clear to us, although Berlin's insistence that he and his father were "pals forever" seems suspiciously glib.*

Berlin is driven to his new Infantry Brigade. There, an officer mockingly suggests that Berlin spend the war painting fences, then snaps that Berlin will be given much, much more challenging responsibilities. On June 11, 1968, he meets the soldiers of his platoon, which are led by the buck sergeant, Oscar Johnson. Doc Peret is the medic. The platoon leader is Lieutenant Sidney Martin. While he is Lieutenant, Martin alienates his soldiers by ordering them to search **tunnels** thoroughly before blowing them up. Martin's commitment to this piece of military protocol led to the deaths of several men. Although Martin is a talented soldier, he dies quickly, to be replaced by Lieutenant Corson. Everyone can sense that Corson is terrified of battle.

In this section, we see a very general account of Berlin's relationships with Doc, Sidney Martin, and the other soldiers. O'Brien will return to describing these relationships again and again, each time in more specific detail. The structure of the novel isn't best described as "moving forward"—rather, O'Brien goes into more and more depth about the same incident. This is a clever strategy for a book about Vietnam, because it places our focus on memory and introspection. The novel isn't just a story about going after Cacciato—it's about how one soldier, Berlin, makes sense of his experiences.

The chapter ends with Paul Berlin preparing for his first real day of the war—the day he's sent out into the wilderness with his fellow troops. He boards a helicopter and travels into the "pocked mangled country."

O'Brien's description of Vietnam is totally grim and pessimistic. There is nothing noble, heroic, or moral about this war—nothing to give a sense of purpose to young soldiers like Berlin.

CHAPTER 5

Some time after the events of Chapter Three, Paul Berlin stays up late at night to serve as a late-night guard. He keeps watch while the other soldiers sleep. To keep himself occupied, he plays with his watch and smokes cigarettes. Alone at night, Berlin dreams about the future. He imagines going back to Fort Dodge and visiting his dad, casually saying that he "won some medals." Next, he fantasizes about visiting Europe, where he'll learn French and explore **Paris** "in Cacciato's honor." He maintains that it's possible for a soldier to walk to Paris.

It's clear, even from these short paragraphs, that Berlin has an uneasy relationship with his father—clearly he isn't just "the best of pals" with the man, as he'd been telling himself earlier. Berlin actually suggests that he's fighting in Vietnam to prove himself to his father, and to earn his father's respect and love. From this scene, the "observation post" is further presented as a peaceful, dreamlike place where Berlin processes and reimagines his experiences.

CHAPTER 6

Following Harold Murphy's desertion, the soldiers continue West into Laos, led by an increasingly unhealthy Lieutenant Corson. Along the way, they find other small objects that seem to signal Cacciato's presence nearby. After many miles, they come to the end of the jungles of Laos: they're now in a vast savannah.

It's a little unrealistic that Cacciato continues to leave clues for the soldiers to find. Speaking strictly within the context of the story, this could be because Cacciato wants *to be followed—he wants to lead the soldiers to safety and peace. In a more meta-textual sense, though, O'Brien seems to be playing fast and loose with all probability, and we are meant to grow suspicious of all the unlikely things that happen to Berlin.*

As they walk along the road that stretches through the savannah, the soldiers find further clues of Cacciato's presence, such as a Black Jack wrapper. Suddenly, the soldiers see a pair of buffalo (water buffalo) dragging a cart across the savannah, not far away. Reflexively, the soldiers open fire on the two buffalo. Even after the other soldiers realize their mistake and cease their fire, Stink continues shooting at one of the animals. He doesn't stop until his gun is empty. Then, he grins and places his leg on the dead buffalo, as if posing for a photograph. One buffalo survives the shooting.

In this disturbing scene, Stink kills a harmless buffalo for no apparent reason. The other soldiers live in such a state of tension and fear that they shoot the buffalo out of "reflex," but in Stink's case, even this excuse doesn't apply. Stink is shooting at the buffalo because he enjoys shooting, and needs something to break the monotony of the march—he's become so hardened by his experiences in Vietnam that he doesn't think twice about taking a life.

The soldiers survey the dead buffalo lying in the middle of the road. Suddenly, they hear crying and yelling—there were women sitting in the cart, herding their two buffalo across the savannah, when the soldiers opened fire. Slowly, the three women—all of whom are weeping hysterically—stand up with their hands high in the air. Stink laughs and admires his own handiwork, calling himself "Fastest hands in the West."

For one of the first times in the novel, we see the different "stages" of the soldier's life: action, reaction, bloodshed, and—crucially—coping with the violence afterwards. As O'Brien has already shown, the soldiers—especially Stink—maintain their sanity by cracking jokes about the horrible things they see and do.

The night after Stink kills the buffalo, the soldiers spend the night at the edge of the savannah. Eddie and Doc drag the buffalo off the road, leaving one buffalo for transportation. Then, the soldiers prepare to interrogate the three women who were herding the animal. One of the women, who speaks little English, says that she and her two companions (who are much older than she) are refugees. She weeps over the dead buffalo—whose name, she insists, is Nguyen—and claims that she raised it since it was a calf. The woman becomes angry, and shouts that the soldiers must pay "reparation" for Nguyen's death.

These women have access to a world of kindness, slow growth, and nurture that's utterly outside of Berlin's frame of reference. After all the violence the soldiers have seen, the idea of weeping over a buffalo seems surreal to them. Sarkin's notion of paying "reparations" suggests the reparations that the Vietnamese government still demands of the U.S. today. The Vietnam War ravaged the country, all in the name of "protecting" it from Communism.

The soldiers continue asking the women questions. The youngest woman's name, she claims, is Sarkin Aung Wang. She has been a refugee for many months, and has been traveling West, away from Saigon, where she once lived. The two older women are her aunts. Lieutenant Corson asks Sarkin where she and her aunts are heading, and Sarkin replies that they're heading for the "Far West," a long way away. Sarkin asks Lieutenant Corson if he'll lead her to the Far West, as a way of apologizing for killing Nguyen. The Lieutenant says something under his breath, but neither Sarkin nor the soldiers can understand him.

The so-called "Far West" could refer to any number of places, but it seems that the Far West is for Sarkin what Paris is for Cacciato—a mystical place of peace, where one can escape the horrors of the Vietnam War. Sarkin and her aunts are on a mission similar to the soldiers, although the women at least acknowledge that they are trying to flee the country.

The evening progresses, and the soldiers eat fish and rice with the three women. The aunts continue weeping for Nguyen. As everyone eats, Paul Berlin watches Sarkin, whom he finds very beautiful. He can't place her age—she could be twelve, fifteen, or twenty. The next morning, the soldiers bury Nguyen and proceed to leave, accompanied by the three women. Eddie and Stink hitch the surviving buffalo up to the cart, and Paul Berlin decides to sit in the cart, next to Sarkin.

The women provide the soldiers with food, but it's not clear where they got this food, or why they're sharing it with the people who murdered their buffalo. This looseness with resources and money is characteristic of the novel as a whole—there are dozens of times when O'Brien invites us to ask, "who's paying for this?" and then deliberately doesn't answer. This adds to the dreamlike quality of the narrative.

CHAPTER 7

The soldiers ride through Laos with the three women they encountered in the previous chapter. They can now cover far more ground, because they have the aunts' remaining buffalo pulling some of them in a cart. During Paul Berlin's time in the cart, he gets to know Sarkin Aung Wan better. He likes her smell, her smile, and her beauty. She tells Paul that she's sorry to see soldiers in Laos—surely this must mean that the fighting has spread very far. Berlin isn't sure what to say. He explains that according to Doc, the war is over. Lieutenant Corson, on the other hand, believes that the war is still going on. Sarkin replies that the soldiers will have to continue traveling to "make sure" the war is finished.

In this section, we realize a crucial plot point: the Vietnam War might be (officially) ended, but no one has any way of knowing the truth. It's entirely possible, then, that Cacciato is deserting for no reason. This adds a layer of bitter irony to everything that occurs—it's implied pretty strongly that Cacciato's actions are all for naught. Sarkin seems to intuitively accept the soldiers' confusion—this is a world of confusion, and Sarkin knows how to survive in it.

Every night, the soldiers set up camp and build a fire, and every night, the two aunts weep for Nguyen. Sarkin does not cry. One day, while she's walking with Paul Berlin, she asks him if they're traveling to **Paris**. Berlin replies that they might be—anything is possible. Sarkin is overjoyed by Berlin's response, and says she has always dreamed of visiting the city's famed churches and museums.

Sarkin immediately appears as a "love interest" for Berlin, and also instantly latches onto his goal of Paris. All this seems suspicious—both in that it is unrealistic dramatically, and in that Sarkin seems to be looking to protect herself, not fall in love.

Shortly after Berlin's conversation with Sarkin, Berlin asks Lieutenant Corson about keeping Sarkin around as a guide—she could be useful, since she speaks French. Corson refuses, and says that they'll drop Sarkin and her aunts off at the next village. Privately, Berlin acknowledges that the savannah—possibly a war zone—is no place for women. But Sarkin, who seems to sense that the soldiers are planning to drop her at a nearby village, tries to convince Berlin that she's strong. She lifts her skirt, revealing her powerful, muscular legs, and whispers that Berlin must convince Corson to let her stay. Berlin is very attracted to Sarkin, and plans to talk to Corson again.

Sarkin's argument for her strength is, of course, an attempt to convince Berlin using her sexuality. This attempt seems fairly effective, too, as Berlin resolves to talk to Corson a second time. There's no evidence that Sarkin is actually attracted to Berlin at all, so it's suggested that she is just being wily and practical in order to survive. This seems unfair to Berlin, but it is totally understandable—American soldiers like Berlin have destroyed Sarkin's country and livelihood, and so it makes sense that she would find it hard to feel tenderly toward them.

Shortly after Corson and Berlin's conversation, the narrator explains, the soldiers "capture Cacciato." It remains to be seen how this happens.

O'Brien gives us another cliffhanger, even as Cacciato himself seems increasingly unreal and distant.

CHAPTER 8

It is 1 AM, and Paul Berlin, is keeping watch in the seaside military fort of Quang Ngai. The year is left unspecified. Berlin's replacement as night watchman is Doc Peret, but Berlin does not wake him. Instead, he walks down from the fort and walks toward the sea. There, Berlin washes his face, hands, and hair, and then climbs back to the fort.

Berlin's washing could represent a kind of baptism—he's born anew in the sea, shedding his past lives—but it's equally likely that O'Brien's use of baptismal imagery is sarcastic. Berlin can never escape what he has experienced.

Back in the fort, Berlin remembers his father, who once advised him to "look out for the good things, too" when he's a soldier. Berlin has taken his father's advice to heart, and he tries to appreciate the moments of calm and peace during the war. He thinks about the soldiers' attempt to reach **Paris**, and wonders how "they might have found a way."

In this fascinating section, we begin to understand more about the architecture of the novel. We'd assumed that the story of "going after Cacciato" is the one O'Brien is presenting to us as the truth (within the world of the novel). Now, however, it's suggested that the story of the soldiers' journey could be a product of Berlin's imagination—he seems to be making up the story as we go along, fantasizing about making it all the way to Paris. This implies that the "observation post" chapters and Berlin's memories of the war before Cacciato's desertion are the only "true" events of the novel.

CHAPTER 9

The chapter begins in the middle of a battle scene. Lieutenant Sidney Martin has just commanded his soldiers—who include Doc, Rudy, Stink, Bernie Lynn, and Frenchie Tucker—to clear out a **tunnel**, and Frenchie has been seriously injured while doing so, seemingly by an enemy soldier. Martin has also ordered Bernie Lynn to drag Frenchie's body out of the tunnel—and Bernie Lynn was seriously injured while doing this.

We see the basic conflict between duty and survival in this section: by following orders, the soldiers are knowingly risking their own lives. This conflict, of course, is only a more particular version of the conflict apparent in the Vietnam War itself, where soldiers were shipped overseas to fight for something they didn't understand.

Doc tends to Frenchie, who has been shot "through the nose." Doc gives Frenchie special painkillers and whispers that he's "going home" because of his **tunnel** wound. Frenchie slowly dies, and Doc turns to Bernie Lynn. Bernie is bleeding profusely, from his throat down to his chest. Seeing that Bernie will never survive, Doc whispers to Stink Harris to inject painkillers into Bernie Lynn's body immediately. Stink refuses and tells Doc that he should do this instead, since he's the medic. After some argument, Rudy takes the needle and injects an unnamed painkiller into Bernie Lynn's body. Bernie smiles and slowly loses his life.

In this section we learn about Doc's character. Although he's something of a pseudoscientist, Doc is also a brave, even gentle man, who uses his training and experience to make his patients' final moments less painful and more satisfying. The scene itself is tragic, however—Doc's skills, like the soldiers' lives, are being wasted in a situation of meaningless violence, where men are killed simply to fulfill the standard routine of "clearing the tunnels."

CHAPTER 10

The chapter opens shortly after the events of Chapter Seven. Doc is tending to Stink Harris's injury: Stink has tried to capture Cacciato, and failed. Stink explains that he came "this close" to capturing Cacciato, but Cacciato injured Sink and managed to run away. Stink mutters, "No more Mr. Nice Guy."

Frustratingly, O'Brien doesn't tell us what Stink did, or how the soldiers almost captured Cacciato. He leaves it to us to imagine the details, perhaps mirroring the process by which Berlin is himself imagining the story that we're reading.

The next day, the soldiers find a pile of Cacciato's old maps. On one of the maps, they find a message: "Look out, there's a hole in the road." After reading this, Lieutenant Corson formulates a new plan: based on the maps, it seems that Cacciato is headed for Mandalay. Because Cacciato is taking a slightly "curved" route, the soldiers can "head him off" by traveling straight—off the road. The soldiers find this plan foolish, since going off the road will require traveling through the jungle again—difficult, tiring work. Corson reiterates that the soldiers must drop off the three women as soon as possible.

Here, our suspicions are confirmed: Cacciato wants *the soldiers to follow him, as he's giving them advice and direction for how best to track him down. Interestingly, the characters in this novel flit in and out (mostly because so many die), so that it's sometimes difficult to remember who is and isn't a part of the soldiers' squad. We haven't heard anything from the three women in a while—we'd almost forgotten them.*

In the evening, the soldiers prepare for their walk through the jungle. Paul Berlin finds Sarkin and tells her that they'll have to let her go soon. Sarkin begs Berlin to find a way to keep her in the group, and reminds him that they could see **Paris** together one day. She weeps, knowing that Berlin will never be able to change Corson's mind.

Sarkin's tears may be perfectly sincere, but this shouldn't imply that she has special feelings for Berlin. She wants to escape her life in Vietnam by traveling west, and traveling with soldiers on the road to Paris was the perfect way to achieve this goal.

The next morning, the soldiers decide to send the women on their way. They help the women climb into the cart. Everyone takes care to move particularly slowly, so that they spend as much time with the women as possible. Sarkin squeezes Berlin's hand and whispers, "You will find a way." Then Lieutenant Corson swats the buffalo, signaling it to begin driving the cart away. Berlin, overcome with emotion, sees the earth "tear itself open" with a loud explosion. Other soldiers watch, awestruck, as the buffalo and its passengers fall into the enormous hole created by the explosion. The hole grows, swallowing up Berlin and his fellow soldiers, taking them "down a hole in the road to **Paris**."

In this section, the line between reality and fantasy or fairy tale disappears. In a passage worthy of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, *Berlin and his friends fall through a hole in the ground. The tone of this passage suggests "magical realism," in which fantastical events are mingled with realistic ones, and are described (and perceived by the characters) as if they are ordinary. This scene also establishes a theme of the sinister liveliness of the land of Vietnam.*

CHAPTER 11

The chapter begins, well before the events of Chapter 1, with Doc Peret trying and failing to save the life of a wounded soldier, Jim Pederson. A helicopter arrives and carries Pederson's body away while the soldiers watch. The soldiers are near a village called Hoi An. Cacciato—still a soldier at this time—works with Harold Murphy, Oscar, and Vaught to prepare marching on.

O'Brien describes the deaths of soldiers in a matter-of-fact way. This isn't to say that the passages aren't emotional—on the contrary, they're more tragic precisely because they're described so coolly. It's as if O'Brien is trying to convey the emptiness of feeling that comes after a traumatic experience.

Paul Berlin marches alongside his fellow soldiers, trying not to think about what's happened to Pederson. As he marches, his lieutenant—not named at this point—uses the radio to order a strike on the village. Helicopters drop white phosphorus gas on the villagers, causing fire and suffocation. Afterwards, the soldiers walk away from the village, silent. They make camp in the jungle, and eat their dinner. As the soldiers eat, they begin talking about Pederson, because "it was always better to talk about it."

One of the signature "rules" of the troops is that it's always better to joke and laugh about horror than it is to repress the horror and keep it bottled up. This is an important survival strategy, one that allows the soldiers to (supposedly) maintain their sanity, no matter how much chaos they witness or participate in. It also connects to the idea of Berlin processing his trauma by reimagining events.

CHAPTER 12

The chapter continues the events described in Chapter Eight. Paul Berlin continues keeping watch. He wonders how it's possible to be brave when "biles" are flowing through his body. He thinks back to his childhood, when he first became conscious that he needed to learn how to be brave. As a child, Berlin was frightened by everything—noise, the dark, **tunnels**, etc. He remembers that he once nearly won the Silver Star—a military medal for valor. He still believes that he has the bravery necessary to win one. There is, he believes, a Silver Star "twinkling somewhere inside him."

It's clear that Berlin's motivation for becoming a soldier was his conflicted relationship with his father. As a child, he was always conscious of being inferior to his father in terms of his strength and masculinity. Becoming a soldier, Berlin believes, is the natural next step, one which will allow him to prove his strength and masculinity and finally make his father proud of him.

CHAPTER 13

Following the events of Chapter 11, Berlin and his fellow soldiers have fallen through the ground into a bizarre hole. Berlin reflexively reaches for his weapon. He can see the buffalo, Sarkin, and her aunts. Suddenly, Sarkin's aunts are "gone," never to return. Berlin senses that he is still falling, and he can see his fellow soldiers, falling as if there's no end in sight.

Sarkin's aunts never reappear in the novel after this section. O'Brien doesn't give them an elaborate death scene—much like Pederson, they're simply eliminated from the pages of the book. This also suggests that the aunts were no longer important to Berlin's imagined story—he wanted to be alone with Sarkin.

Suddenly, Berlin hears a noise and turns—he finds himself crouching on the ground, looking at Oscar Johnson, who is carrying a lighted match. Berlin finds that he can't stop giggling—he's nearly hysterical with fear. Doc Peret whispers for him to be quiet, but Berlin finds it difficult to stop laughing.

Just as the soldiers try to laugh and joke about the deaths of their friends, Berlin can't help but giggle in the midst of a horrifying situation. This is a kind of release of tension, and a way of processing horror and trauma.

The soldiers look around, Berlin still giggling. They are standing in a large network of **tunnels**, lighted with torches. Suspecting that there will be booby traps on the way, the soldiers try to find their way through the tunnels and back to the surface. The soldiers walk through the tunnels, eventually finding a large, well-lit room where a man in a green uniform is sitting.

The soldier's journey underground seems to correspond to the "middle stage" of the hero's journey. (See Symbols for more information.) Yet unlike the events in a heroic epic, it's not clear what the soldiers will experience underground—who'll they'll encounter, and what wisdom they'll receive.

Lieutenant Corson points a gun at the man in the green uniform and demands to know who he is. The man explains that his name is Li Van Hgoc, a major in the Vietcong Battalion. He offers the men brandy, fruit, fish, and rice, and offers to "talk of the war." As "Van" speaks, Paul imagines himself standing back in his observation tower, keeping watch. This is the first time he's seen a living enemy—everyone else on the opposing side of the war died almost as soon as Berlin saw them. Berlin's mind then jumps to Bernie Lynn, who won the Silver Star for exploring a **tunnel** and dying. As Berlin thinks about Lynn, he senses that his fear is disappearing rapidly.

In a bizarre turn of events, the Vietcong soldier who lives in the tunnels treats his enemies, the American troops, with politeness and courtesy. More oddly, the Americans don't acknowledge his behavior as strange in the slightest. This reinforces the sense of magical realism in the novel—the most extraordinary events are taken for granted by all the characters. For us as readers, however, the fantastical elements are meant to emphasize the tone of surreality and confusion.

The soldiers interrogate Li Van Hgoc about the Vietcong. They want to know how the Vietcong hide themselves, what motivates them, etc. Van points out that the soldiers are fighting to defend their land—the land, then, is the U.S. army's real enemy. As Van speaks, Sarkin helps to translate his words. After the soldiers finish asking Van questions, he shows them the vast network of **tunnels** the Vietcong have dug. The tunnels are full of weapons, ammunition, and supplies. Van takes the soldiers to a periscope with a view of the surface. He motions for Berlin to look through the periscope. Berlin does so, but can't understand what he's looking at. A group of men seem to be gathered around the mouth of a tunnel.

Van's observations about the land itself being the soldiers' true enemy confirms what O'Brien established earlier—the land, which can swallow up an entire squad of soldiers, is more powerful than guns and invading armies. Once again, O'Brien ends the chapter on a note of ambiguity—we don't know exactly what Berlin is looking at, or why it's so important. Even with Berlin as the protagonist of the novel, our access to his perspective and inner thoughts is conspicuously limited.

CHAPTER 14

The chapter begins with the death of Frenchie Tucker. Tucker has just stepped into the **tunnel**, and been murdered while trying to secure the area. Sidney Martin calmly says, "Somebody's got to go down." Oscar, furious with Martin, says that there's no point in sending a single soldier into the tunnels—it would be better to blow up the entire tunnel first. Martin's only response is, "It's a war."

The tautology that "War is war" can be used to justify almost anything, including Martin's seemingly heartless actions in the name of protocol. In a larger sense, the idea of "war is war" was used to justify all sorts of atrocities that the U.S. army committed in Vietnam (see Background Info).

Martin had ordered Frenchie Tucker to climb into the **tunnel**. At first, Tucker refused to endanger his life. Many of the other soldiers murmured their agreement, but Martin insisted that Tucker go underground, or be court-martialed later on. Tucker climbs into the tunnel, and soon afterwards there is a gunshot. Martin calmly says that another soldier will have to climb into the hole. Bernie Lynn volunteers to explore the hole. He climbs in, but before he's made any progress, he's shot. The other soldiers pull Bernie out. His face is bleeding, and he says, "Holy Moses."

In the conflict between duty and survival, the soldiers choose duty. Amazingly, even after it's obvious that, whoever goes inside the tunnel will probably die, Bernie Lynn volunteers. It's as if the bravest and most selfless soldiers are the ones most likely to be murdered in a senseless way. When obligation overcomes one's desire to escape, the results are "nobler," but often more tragic.

CHAPTER 15

The chapter begins almost immediately after the events of Chapter 13. Berlin peers through a periscope and Li Van Hgoc, who's standing beside him, explains what he's looking out. Van, who's concluding his explanation, says, "things may be viewed from many angles."

We resume the chapter shortly after Berlin peers through the periscope. The notion that things can be seem from many angles is clearly meant as a comment on the novel itself, with its obvious discontinuities and perspectival shifts.

Van continues escorting the soldiers through the **tunnels**. He shows them a beautiful lounge area, and a large kitchen full of delicious-smelling food. Suddenly, Lieutenant Corson interrupts Van, and explains that he and his troops "need to get going." Van laughs slightly and points out the "snag" in Corson's plan: Corson and his troops are Van's prisoners, since they're trespassing on Vietcong territory. Corson whispers menacingly that he and his troops have Van outmanned—a fact that Van readily admits. Corson orders Stink Harris to tie Van to a chair. The troops then rush out through the **tunnels** and proceed to destroy as much as they can: the periscope, electronics, food, etc. Van weeps as he watches the soldiers destroy his beloved tunnels.

In this sudden, unexpectedly moving ending to the conversation between Van and the soldiers, we come to understand the pain of Van's existence. He's all alone in a tunnel, meaning that he gravitates to whomever explores the tunnel, even if they're his enemies in the Vietnam War. The soldiers' destruction of Van's home, then, seems strangely cruel and petty—like a child spitefully destroying his siblings' toys.

After the soldiers destroy the **tunnels**, they return to ask Van for "his story." Van is a young man, though he looks much older. He was born in Hanoi, was trained as a member of the Communist Party, and grew up with an excellent education. When "the war" broke out, he was sent to South Vietnam to fight alongside the Vietcong. Overcome with fear, Van tried to desert his army, but was captured soon after. As punishment, he was sent to operate the Vietcong tunnels, never coming to the surface of the earth. Van tried to escape from the tunnels many times, but could never manage to find a way out.

Van is a sympathetic character, a man who was forced to fight in a war he didn't care about at all. In an ironic way, his story parallels that of Cacciato: he tried to desert, and seems to be suffering the consequences of his decision. One could say that the tunnels symbolize the inescapable trauma and pain that the American soldiers endure in Vietnam—but they also show that this trauma isn't limited to the Americans, and the war is devastating to Vietnamese soldiers as well.

As the soldiers gather around Van, they try to think of a way out of the **tunnels**, as clearly, Van can't help them. Sarkin speaks up and says that there is a way to escape: "The way in is the way out." She explains, cryptically, that the soldiers have fallen into a hole—now they must fall out. Van cries out that Sarkin is speaking in riddles, and can't be trusted. But Lieutenant Corson, who seems to be in a trance state, looks at Sarkin and decides to follow her. Sarkin leads Corson and the other soldiers away from Van, into the darkness of the tunnels.

In this fantastical twist, Sarkin frees the soldiers, seemingly by saying a kind of "spell" that allows them to "fall out." It's fascinating that Corson and his men follow Sarkin's lead instead of questioning—indeed, Van is the only one who questions Sarkin. Whether this is further evidence of the magical realism of the story, or of the soldiers' desperation, is itself never made clear.

Sarkin leads the soldiers through the **tunnels**. Time stretches on, and Berlin isn't sure if the soldiers are spending hours or days in the tunnels. They go to sleep in the tunnels and wake up, still underground. Berlin wonders if they'll ever see the surface of the earth again.

Just as our sense of distance becomes confused as we trace Cacciato's progress across Asia, our sense of time also becomes elastic in this interlude in the tunnels.

CHAPTER 16

The chapter begins in July of 1968, with the soldiers moving through the villages along a great river, the Song Tra Bong. Frenchie Tucker is still alive, and Paul Berlin keeps busy writing letters to his parents. He writes that life is good and easy—the river is beautiful, and he has no complaints.

Once again, Berlin claims that life is easy—his relationship with his parents is good. We have learned to be skeptical about these claims, however, as Berlin clearly has problems with his father in particular.

One day in July, the soldiers arrive at a small village, Thap Ro. There, Eddie Lazzutti takes a woman's basket and converts it into a basketball hoop. Life is dull, and the soldiers have nothing to do all day except play ball.

O'Brien uses his real wartime experience in writing, and recognizes that war doesn't only consist of battles—the vast majority of a soldier's time consists of waiting for something to happen.

The soldiers play pickup basketball with each other. Paul Berlin enjoys the games, but feels a deep sense of unease. The village seems calm, but the soldiers continue searching for **tunnels** and bunkers. They find a few tunnels, though they're always empty. The soldiers sense that "the enemy" is very close by, waiting for them to let their guard down. Doc Peret compares the squad to a group of blindfolded children trying to pin the tail on the donkey.

The sense of paranoia that O'Brien conveys here isn't just artistic license—Vietnam veterans have often said they felt as if they were always being watched, either by the Vietnamese villagers or by the Vietcong themselves. Doc's analogy—like the novel's fantastical elements—is disturbing because of the way it juxtaposes childishness and menace.

July turns into August, and the soldiers begin fighting with one another. Stink and Bernie Lynn have an argument about basketball, and after a few moments of shouting they begin wrestling and clawing at each other. Yet even this fight concludes, and the lull persists—there's no sign of danger anywhere in the village. Lieutenant Sidney Martin tells his troops that they'll have to begin searching more **tunnels** and bunkers. Cacciato enjoys playing basketball, and seems strangely unconcerned by the uncertainty of the soldiers' situation. Oscar Johnson mutters that Cacciato is "Trouble with a capital T."

Part of the horror of the Vietnam War is that the American soldiers—the people who are supposedly united in their opposition to the Vietcong and to Communism—can't help but fight amongst themselves, and have no real sense of purpose in their mission. The Vietcong, by contrast, seem well organized and committed to the cause of fighting for their political ideology.

The days drag on, uneventfully. The lull becomes so oppressive that the soldiers privately wish for combat of some kind. They leave the village and proceed through the jungles. One day, Rudy Chassler stumbles onto a land mine, and the explosion kills him instantly. Secretly, the soldiers are relieved.

One bizarre side effect of the idleness of the soldier's life is that one starts to secretly hunger for action. This is very difficult to put into words, and thus, none of the soldiers admit that they're relieved when the mine kills Rudy Chassler.

CHAPTER 17

Following the events of chapter 15, Sarkin Aung Wan leads the soldiers out of the **tunnels**, through sewage, until they come to a ladder that leads to the streets of Mandalay. Paul Berlin walks through Mandalay with his fellow soldiers and mutters, "civilization." Oscar Johnson notes that Mandalay reminds him of Detroit.

For not the first time in the novel, Johnson compares a place to Detroit—it's almost a running joke, and perhaps an interesting metaphor for American imperialism (i.e., Americans think everywhere is their home).

The narrative cuts ahead a few hours—the soldiers have boarded a trolley that will take them to the Hotel Minneapolis. They arrive at the hotel and order rooms.

O'Brien doesn't explain where the soldiers are getting their money—they simply find rooms wherever they go. This corresponds to the escalating implausibility of the book—an implausibility that increasingly seems to be emanating from Berlin's own imagination.

The narrative cuts ahead a few more hours. Paul Berlin is sitting in a hotel room with Sarkin Aung Wan, who is clipping his toenails. Sarkin asks Berlin—whom she's begun to call "Spec Four"—if they'll walk through the streets of **Paris** together, and Berlin insists that they will, soon enough. Sarkin asks Berlin if it's necessary to chase after Cacciato, and Berlin shrugs—"it's the mission," he says. Later in the evening, the narrator notes, "they almost made love."

Sarkin and Berlin have a relationship, but it's not clear if their relationship is romantic in any meaningful sense, or if it's simply opportunistic (Berlin hasn't seen a woman in months, and Sarkin wants a man to take her to Paris alive). That they "almost" make love underscores the incompleteness of their feelings for each other: this isn't a fairy-tale romance (though it may be a fairy tale).

The next morning, the soldiers leave their hotel and begin searching Mandalay for Cacciato. Berlin searches with Sarkin to help him, and he navigates through markets, churches, etc. Berlin feels happy—the city is beautiful, and the sunset, too.

As they might have hoped, the soldiers' lives seem to be getting better, not worse, the farther they travel from Vietnam.

CHAPTER 18

It is evening in Mandalay, shortly after the events of the previous chapter, and the troops have gathered together to eat dinner. Eddie raises an important question: what are the soldiers supposed to be searching for? Oscar Johnson replies that the soldiers will have to think like Cacciato, so they'll have to search the brothels and bars. Eddie protest that these places "don't sound like Cacciato," but Johnson insists that they must all look there. Everyone drinks a toast to Harold Murphy, and to their memories together. Doc then proposes a toast to Lieutenant Corson—a man with, Doc claims, 25 years of combat service. He even proposes a toast for Cacciato. Afterwards, Eddie asks one more question—what do the soldiers do if they *do* find Cacciato? In answer, Corson makes a "vague, dismissive gesture with his hand."

The scope of this novel is so broad that it's sometimes easy to forget who is and isn't a part of the squad at any given time. Here, O'Brien presents us with a big, boisterous scene in which the soldiers, including Corson (who hasn't appeared in a while), bond with one another over alcohol. Eddie asks an obvious question, and the fact that Corson refuses to answer suggests that 1) Corson is slowly losing his mind; 2) the soldiers are more interested in leaving Vietnam than capturing Cacciato; and 3) Cacciato will probably have to die in the end—a fact that the soldiers don't want to think about.

The soldiers establish their new routine: they wake up early in the Minneapolis Hotel, begin searching the city, then return to sleep. Paul Berlin is particularly confused by the new routine, and he can't imagine where Cacciato could be. He walks with Sarkin through restaurants and teashops, never seeing a sign of Cacciato. Berlin tries to remember details of Cacciato's personality that could help him find the man. Cacciato loves to fish, he remembers.

O'Brien endows Cacciato with a mystical, almost religious presence, and his love for fishing (which connects him to Saint Peter) is no coincidence. Berlin's relationship with Cacciato isn't entirely clear, but they seem to have been friends at one point: Berlin knows things about Cacciato that the others haven't bothered to learn.

One day, Berlin and Sarkin are walking through Mandalay when Berlin—much to his amazement—sees Cacciato walking less than six feet in front of him. Cacciato is dressed as a monk, and his hands are folded. Around him there stand four other monks, all wearing identical robes. Berlin and Sarkin struggle to keep up with Cacciato in the crowded streets. They follow Cacciato and his fellow "monks" to a large altar, around which there's a crowd. Berlin whispers that he's "going after" Cacciato, and runs toward him.

In yet another coincidence, Berlin runs into Cacciato in a crowded city. Once again, we see Cacciato as a religious figure, and here the symbolism is made explicit. It's never explained how Cacciato became a monk—it's as if he can assume whatever shape is useful to him at a given time, or as if his physical appearance reflects Berlin's idea of his character.

Berlin approaches Cacciato, now standing at the center of the crowd. The air smells of incense, and everyone is chanting together. As Berlin gets closer, he catches a glimpse of Cacciato's face—or at least "what might have been Cacciato," staring directly at him. Suddenly, two men seize Berlin by the arms and pull him back. Berlin tries to break free, but finds that the men are smothering him. Berlin sees Cacciato's face only inches away from his own, and then Berlin loses consciousness.

None of the events in this section are explained later: we don't know why Cacciato has henchmen, why Cacciato has become a monk, etc. This adds to the mood of surrealism in the story, as Berlin doesn't even understand who *he's trying to chase down. Cacciato again seems almost superhuman, and impossible to capture.*

When Berlin wakes up, he's lying alone in a park, with Sarkin standing over him. Sarkin explains that he's been passed out for hours. Berlin asks which way Cacciato went, and Sarkin, smiling slightly, points toward the railroad station—"The way to **Paris**."

Here Sarkin seems to flaunt the fact that she and the soldiers are going to Paris, regardless of Cacciato's presence there. The soldiers continue to keep up the pretense of a "mission," but Sarkin smirks at this lie.

CHAPTER 19

It is 3 AM, following the events of Chapter 12 (beyond this, the time is unspecified). Paul Berlin imagines telling his friends and family the story of how Cacciato walked to **Paris**. He imagines the objections his friends will have—don't you need passports to enter a foreign country? don't you need money? etc. Cacciato tries to think of answers to these objections—ways that Cacciato could, in fact, make it to Paris.

In these "observation post" chapters, it seems that O'Brien—through the voice of Berlin—is thinking through all the criticisms of plausibility that he could reasonably make of the novel. It becomes more and more likely that Berlin is telling himself the story we're reading, working out the plot holes (or defiantly refusing to work them out) as he moves along.

CHAPTER 20

The chapter begins near the start of Paul Berlin's time in the army, with the soldiers sitting in a helicopter. Everyone is nervous, and some of the soldiers are more terrified of flying than they are of fighting. As the helicopter drifts to the ground, the soldiers open fire, though the narrator doesn't say at *whom*, exactly, they're firing. The helicopter touches down, and the soldiers rush out, still shooting into the distance.

The ambiguity in O'Brien's description of the helicopter's landing is a good encapsulation of the Vietnam War itself. It's often been said that in Vietnam, the American soldiers didn't properly understand just who they were fighting, or what they were fighting for.

CHAPTER 21

It is 2 AM, December 1968, and Paul Berlin is sitting on a train, the Delhi Express, traveling away from Mandalay to Chittagong. The only other soldier who is awake is Lieutenant Corson. Corson confesses to Berlin that he sometimes feels like he's in the middle of a dream. He tells Berlin that Berlin is a "good lad." Then, unexpectedly, Corson adds, "We've been kidnapped." At first, Berlin laughs, thinking Corson is joking. Then he realizes that his lieutenant is being serious. Corson begins to giggle. He asks Berlin if he's ever seen Bob Hope's "Road" movies.

These chapters all have similar names, and reference the "Road to Paris." This seems to be an homage to the beloved Bob Hope "Road" movies of the 40s and 50s, and underscores a mood of giddy comedy that's juxtaposed with grim realism. What Corson means when he says "we've been kidnapped" is unclear: perhaps he's stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the obvious truth that he and the soldiers want to go to Paris.

The next morning, the soldiers are preparing to search their train. Stink will stand in the aisle, waiting for Cacciato to run away, while the other soldiers search the cars. Berlin proceeds through the train, asking people for identification. Most of the passengers comply, but they look at Berlin with a mixture of fear and hatred. After searching and finding nothing, Berlin goes to meet with Oscar and Eddie. Neither has found Cacciato, but they come across Cacciato's bag, which is now empty.

Whenever the soldiers lose sight of Cacciato, they discover a convenient clue, reminding them that they're moving in the right direction. This is, of course, highly implausible—but plausibility has more or less gone out the window by this point in the book. The goal of the story isn't to convince anyone—it's to provide satisfaction for the teller, presumably Paul Berlin himself.

CHAPTER 22

The chapter begins with the narrator noting that Eddie Lazzutti loves to sing. He listens to radio broadcasts and sings along with the music.

Singing, like humor and storytelling, is another way of processing and escaping from the horrors of war.

The narrator proceeds to describe the other soldiers. Oscar Johnson is dark-skinned, and has an "aristocratic" bearing. He always claims that he's from Detroit, and talks about it all the time. Nevertheless, every letter he writes is sent to Maine—never Michigan. Paul Berlin is fascinated with Johnson—he thinks that Johnson is half performing, half being, to the point where nobody, least of all Johnson, can tell the difference.

The difference between performing and being is a complex one, and highly relevant to the story. All the soldiers in the novel are lying to themselves in some profound way. They want to believe that they're going to Paris to arrest Cacciato—but in fact, they're traveling to Paris because they want to escape Vietnam forever.

The next soldier the narrator describes is Jim Pederson. Pederson carries rosary beads wherever he goes, and tries to pass on Christianity to the people in whichever village the soldiers visit. He's regarded as the most moral of the soldiers, and once, he convinced the others not to burn down a village. He was also the soldier who wrote to Billy Boy's parents after Billy Boy's death of "fright."

Pederson—supposedly the "good" soldier of the group—is among the first to die. His moral goodness also seems entirely relative, as there doesn't seem to be anything extremely moral about telling people not to burn down an entire village. The standard for good has been set so low in Vietnam that Pederson seems like a saint.

Stink Harris comes from a big family. He takes great care of his rifle, and often says that it's his best friend. Early on, he befriends Bernie Lynn, and even writes a letter to his own sister, Carla, introducing Carla to Bernie. Bernie and Carla begin writing frequent letters to each other. Stink supports these correspondences, until he finds Bernie carrying a photograph of Carla, naked.

The chapter is structured as a list of soldiers, each of whom has a "persona." Stink's persona seems wild and unkempt, and he has a good relationship with his family, which is also big and loud. His sister, it's loosely implied, is one of his closest friends.

Lieutenant Corson is a widower, but he still wears his wedding ring. He's different from other lieutenants, such as Sidney Martin, in that he doesn't place too much emphasis on routine. Whereas Martin orders single men to explore the **tunnels** before blowing them up, Corson orders the tunnels blown up straight away.

Corson is older and more experienced than Martin, but on the surface he seems less organized and brave. This points less Corson's cowardice or incompetence, however, and more to a sense of disillusionment and world-weariness.

Doc Peret is the soldiers' resident scientist, and he has complicated ideas about everything. But he defines science a little oddly—anything that "gets results," he insists, is scientific.

Doc is a somewhat comic character, but like all the comedy in the novel, there's a serious message underlying. Doc is focused on results, and like the other soldiers, he'll do almost anything to survive.

The narrator ends the chapter by noting that the soldiers almost never knew each other's real names. Some soldiers have to earn their nicknames through hard work, while others arrive with their nicknames and never lose them. Other men go by their surnames and nothing else—Cacciato, for example. Still others, such as Sidney Martin, go by their rank alone—lieutenant.

One paradox of the war in Vietnam, O'Brien implies here, is that the soldiers were forced to confront the most personal, intimate parts of themselves, while also creating artificial, one-dimensional versions *of themselves as a way of processing their experiences and retaining their sanity.*

CHAPTER 23

The soldiers have arrived in the city of Delhi, and come to the Hotel Phoenix. It is there, the narrator confides, that Lieutenant Corson falls in love.

O'Brien suggests that in this chapter, Corson will play a larger role, and perhaps regain some energy and hope.

At the Hotel Phoenix, Corson sees a woman wearing a blouse and blue jeans. To Corson's surprise, the woman—an Indian—is thrilled to find Americans in the city. The woman introduces herself as Hamijolli Chand, or "Jolly" for short. That evening, the woman gets drinks with the soldiers. She explains that she studied at Johns Hopkins for two years, and knows American culture well. As Jolly talks, Berlin is reminded of his own mother, for reasons he can't entirely explain. Jolly has a husband, who works in the hotel, and serves the men hamburgers—something very difficult to come by in India. Corson whispers to Doc Peret that Jolly is a "brave, remarkable woman."

Jolly is one of the most unlikely characters in the novel. She seems almost too perfect for the soldiers: all of her tastes and experiences seem tailor-made to endear her to Corson and the troops. This might suggest that she's projecting an image to satisfy other people, however, much as the soldiers invent personas for themselves. It's also surprising how quickly Corson comes to love Jolly—it's as if, like Berlin, he's so desperate for a friend that he'll take anyone.


At the soldiers' meal, Jolly Chand is cheerful. She asks Doc about medicine in the United States, and asks Stink about his family. Jolly is especially nice to Corson, who quickly becomes very drunk. Corson talks about his military service in Korea, and notes that in Korea, "everybody liked us," while in "'Nam," on the other hand, "Nobody likes nobody." As Jolly and Corson talk, Jolly's husband leaves the room and doesn't return. Corson doesn't notice this.

This is the first time in the novel that Vietnam is mentioned explicitly—an incredible thing, considering that this is essentially a book about the Vietnam War. But this also shows something important about the soldiers. Although they claim that the best way to cope with tragedy is to talk about it, when the soldiers are dealing with a truly unpleasant reality, they repress it and avoid speaking its name at all costs. Vietnam is the ultimate such unpleasant reality. It's also telling that Jolly's husband seems to support Jolly's seduction of Corson, as if they've gone through similar situations before.


The evening goes on, and Berlin spends time with Sarkin, drinking brandy and kissing her neck. Meanwhile, Corson is still talking to Jolly, but then he starts to weep, saying, "What happened to her?"

Corson's emotions seem perfectly real, and yet his motives for wanting to spend time with Jolly seem desperate—he misses his wife and wants feminine consolation.

The next morning, Corson and Jolly don't come down for breakfast. Jolly's husband serves tea to the hotel guests. The soldiers speculate that Corson has slept with Jolly, and say that Jolly is a "phony." Berlin goes for a walk. He returns in the afternoon and notices Corson sitting with Jolly outside the hotel. Berlin thinks about "how young he is."

It's easy enough for the other soldiers to sense that Jolly is performing for them—her act is too perfect to be real. And yet the soldiers "perform" in precisely this way for each other: they give themselves fake names and backstories in order to distance themselves from their own sins and misdeeds in Vietnam.


CHAPTER 24

It is August, and Paul Berlin's platoon travels to Chu Lai for a "stand-down" that will last one week. The soldiers relax, playing games and swimming. They sleep late and write letters to their families.

A stand-down is meant to be a time when the soldiers can relax and forget about their problems, but as the novel often shows, trauma isn't easily forgotten.

On the soldiers' last day of stand-down, Eddie, Doc, Paul Berlin, and Oscar walk to the 82nd Commo Detachment, where the soldiers keep the army's radio communication system. There, the soldiers place calls to their friends and families in the United States. Eddie's call connects first, after nearly an hour of trying. The technicians take him to a soundproof room, where he talks for some time. Berlin watches him, wondering whom he could be talking to. When Eddie walks out of the soundproof room, he says that he'd been talking to his mother.

The soundproof room suggests the secretiveness that goes into the soldiers' personal lives. They've tried to hard to project certain images for themselves, so anything beyond this image—such as the soldiers' relationships with their families—must be kept completely secret.

The next soldier to place a call is Doc, followed by Oscar. They both walk out of the soundproof rooms looking choked up, as if their calls have been tragic. Berlin feels mature as he looks at Doc and Oscar—he and his friends are "genuine war buddies," now that they've shared emotions.

Even if the content of the phone calls is kept secret, the act of making phone calls is communal, and Berlin feels a sense of friendship with his fellow soldiers. His desire to have "war buddies," however, only serves to highlight how naïve he still is in many ways.

Berlin goes to place his call. Inside the soundproof room, he places a call to his mother. As he waits for the call to go through, he imagines his mother greeting him cheerfully and telling him that Berlin's father is "putzing" around the house, trying to repair things. Berlin tries to think of something to say to his mother, but can't think of anything about being a soldier that doesn't sound horribly forced. Eventually, he decides that he'll ask his mother if she's quit smoking yet—a running joke in his family, since his mother never quits smoking. All this goes on in Berlin's head as he waits for the call to connect. But nobody picks up the phone on the other end. Secretly, Berlin is relieved. He leaves the soundproof room and rejoins his fellow soldiers, who pat him on the back and say, "Tough luck."

In this long, painful section, we see the truth about Berlin's relationship with his parents. Although he likes to tell himself that he and his family get along wonderfully, he's unsure of what to say to them. Clearly, their relationship is far from close and loving. It's almost a relief to Berlin when the phone keeps ringing—not unlike the relief that the soldiers felt when one of their friends was blown up by a landmine. It's better for Berlin to keep pretending that he loves his family than it is for him to confront the reality that he doesn't, and that his family might not love him in return.

CHAPTER 25

During Berlin's early days as a soldier, Lieutenant Sidney Martin orders his soldiers through the mountains. There is no rain, and the soldiers are hot and thirsty every day.

We still haven't learned exactly how Sidney Martin lost control of his troops. As we will see, it's as if this memory has been repressed even in the narrative.

Lieutenant Sidney Martin tells his troops that there will be a battle very soon. He cautions them to save their strength for the fighting—a difficult task, since walking through the mountains requires enormous energy. Paul Berlin—still an inexperienced soldier—notes that Martin seems not to enjoy battles. He has a handsome, refined face, and seems to avoid violence at all costs—a strange quality for a lieutenant.

Lieutenant Martin's tendency to avoid battle isn't as unusual as Berlin thinks it to be. On the contrary, a good military commander should avoid combat when possible, as the goal of a war is to minimize casualties on one's own side. Berlin, still inexperienced, doesn't understand this.

Paul Berlin proceeds with climbing through the mountains, unsure of what will be waiting for him on the other side. He lowers his gaze to his feet, avoiding the sights of the mountains. Sidney Martin admires his fortitude, but Paul Berlin does not notice—he's too focused on climbing forward.

At this point, Berlin's tendency to "lose himself" in his own head is seen as an admirable quality, at least insofar as it allows him to continue to endure suffering. We also see this quality in Berlin's invented narrative about the trip to Paris. Overall, O'Brien implies that a kind of disconnection from reality is necessary to survive horrors like the Vietnam War.

CHAPTER 26

The chapter begins shortly after the events of Chapter 23. The soldiers are still in Delhi, and Cacciato is nowhere in sight. Paul Berlin spends nearly all of his time with Sarkin. They go shopping for clothing and jewelry, and take long walks through the city streets. Sarkin is full of questions about Berlin's life in the U.S., and often talks about her own life in the city of Cholon, where her family is from. They still talk about **Paris**, and Sarkin continues to fantasize about walking though Paris with Berlin. Without telling his friends, or even Sarkin, Berlin knows that he is ready to "move on" to a new city.

At this point in the novel, the soldiers aren't even pretending that their priority is finding Cacciato. Cacciato is only a convenient excuse for their travels through Europe and Asia. Thus, Berlin isn't ready to move on to another city because he thinks Cacciato has gone—he wants to move on because he's curious about more traveling. Sarkin's realism seems to have affected him, and he's eager to make it to Paris as soon as he can.

One day, Corson shows Berlin a copy of the local newspaper. Amazingly, there is a photograph of Cacciato on the front page. In the photograph, Cacciato is sitting in a train car near Tapier Station. Corson can make out that the train is heading for Kabul. Corson tells Berlin that they'll have to head to Afghanistan. Within a few hours, the troops have assembled, and they're ready to move on to Afghanistan.

As usual, Cacciato's appearance is a little too convenient (reminding us that this story may be the product of Berlin's imagination, not "reality"), but this shouldn't suggest that Cacciato is what's really motivating the soldiers to travel—after all, Cacciato's appearance comes after *Berlin has decided to move on.*

Before he leaves, Lieutenant Corson has a glass of cognac with Jolly Chand. Corson seems to be overcome with emotion. Doc Peret gently taps Corson's shoulder and tells him that it's time for the troops to head for the train. Corson mutters that he's not going—he's "officially retired" from military life. Doc tries to convince Corson to rejoin his troops, but nothing he says seems to work. Corson mutters, "send me a card from Paree" (**Paris**).

Corson has always been a reluctant leader, and almost cowardly at times. Here, he shows his true colors by refusing to continue. This isn't exactly surprising, and indeed, Corson seems like the most honest of the soldiers. He has no illusions about the mission to capture Cacciato—he just wants to find happiness.

Doc leaves Corson and tells the troops that Corson isn't coming. Some of the soldiers want to wait in Delhi with their lieutenant, and others want to proceed to Kabul. Oscar—the ranking officer in Corson's absence—grins and tells Doc that Corson is one of the "walkin' wounded." Doc seems to understand what Oscar is suggesting. They sneak back to the Hotel Phoenix, where they find Corson, still lying in his chair, alone (Jolly has gone) and asleep. The soldiers carry Corson to a taxi and tell the driver to hurry.

Oscar seems to know Corson better than Corson knows himself. Corson believes that he's in love with Jolly, but Johnson (and, for that matter, the other soldiers) understands that Corson is only feeling desperate for somebody. *Knowing this, the soldiers disobey their commander's orders and take him onto the train. This is technically an act of insubordination, but also an expression of the soldiers' loyalty.*

CHAPTER 27

Following the events of Chapter 26, the soldiers are sitting on a train. They watch the mountains of Punjab, Peshawar, and Kabul. Sitting with the soldiers is Lieutenant Corson—the soldiers have brought him along. Corson wakes up and asks where he is. Then he sees that he's in a train, and quietly lights a cigarette.

Corson's behavior in this opening scene seems to confirm that Johnson and his fellow soldiers did the right thing by "kidnapping" Corson from Delhi—Corson wouldn't have lasted long with Jolly.

Paul Berlin watches Corson smoke his cigarette, and thinks back to his own experiences earlier in the year. After climbing through the mountains, ordered on by Lieutenant Sidney Martin, Berlin found himself in the midst of a large battle. Trees were burning, and shots were coming from the distance. One of Berlin's fellow soldiers, Ready Mix (whose real name nobody knew) was killed immediately. The soldiers pushed ahead for what felt like days. Eventually, they came to a burning hospital, surrounded by bombshell craters. The enemy forces seemed to have left. Martin and the soldiers discovered a network of **tunnels**, and as usual, Martin ordered his troops to explore the tunnels before bombing them out.

The line between the two storylines in this book—Berlin's pursuit of Cacciato, and his memories of his earlier days as a soldier—is blurring. Previously, this line was clearly delineated by chapter, but now, a chapter about Berlin's experiences in Delhi can dissolve into a flashback about his time in Vietnam. Martin embodies the conflict between orders and self-preservation. The tunnels of Vietnam pose a threat to any American soldier—a threat to which no sane person would want to expose himself.

The chapter cuts back to the soldiers' train ride from Delhi to Kabul. The soldiers play cards, sleep, and stare at the vast, snow-capped mountains.

Again, O'Brien shows us the importance of "interludes" in a soldier's life. So much of Berlin's time is spent playing cards and trying to relax.

The soldiers' train stops—there is a problem on the tracks, and the passengers will have to spend the night in the neighboring town of Ovissil. The soldiers meet the mayor of Ovissil, who loves to tell stories. The mayor tells the soldiers that "God's will is always stronger than man's will." Paul Berlin is especially fascinated by the mayor—a charismatic, mysterious man. The mayor stares at Berlin, and says, "you are young. Come to me when you have had time to make a real history for yourself." The next morning, he sends the soldiers on their way, weeping slightly.

The importance of storytelling is a key theme of this novel, and in this sense, the mayor is one of the key characters. The notion that God's will is always stronger than man's is wildly optimistic, but also fatalistic. Berlin's brand of storytelling is a little different—instead of accepting that God is telling the "story" of reality, Berlin tries to develop alternate stories to tell himself, alternate histories.

CHAPTER 28

Berlin thinks about what the mayor has told him. He thinks to himself that he *does* have a history. He grew up playing baseball and canoeing with his father. He spent summers building houses alongside his father, and drinking beer. He decided to become a soldier at the age of twenty. This, he concludes, is his history.

Berlin is a young man, and still trying to make a history for himself, but we can see that his "history" with his father is nonsense—he fashions loving memories to replace the dearth of such memories in his life. This reminds us that Berlin, first and foremost, is a storyteller. When he doesn't like reality, he changes it.

CHAPTER 29

The soldiers arrive in the city of Tehran. There, they celebrate Christmas—making decorations, brewing eggnog, and even smoking the last of Oscar's marijuana. Lieutenant Corson gets very sick again, but it's not clear exactly why. Doc tries to care for Corson, but lacks the proper medical equipment. He claims that Corson is homesick—homesick for his literal home and for the war, too. The only cure for homesickness, Doc concludes, is time.

As usual, Doc practices something between medicine and witchcraft, but he also has a point: Corson is suffering from a sense of nostalgia for Jolly, and a general sense of uselessness. He's supposedly the commander of the troops, but seems to wield almost no authority whatsoever.

One day, the narrator explains, the soldiers are arrested, "only minutes after the beheading." It is a cold winter's afternoon in Tehran, and the soldiers are carrying Corson through the streets so that he can get some fresh air. They notice a large rally down the street—military officers wearing their uniforms are standing before a massive crowd of people. As the people begin to cheer, a van drives through the crowd, very slowly. Doc seems to understand what's happening, and he tells Berlin to watch closely. A police officer emerges from the van, leading behind him a young man. The officer leads the man to a stage, where a soldier busies himself looking for a razor. Having found the razor, the soldier shaves the young man's head, much to Berlin's confusion and disgust.

As the soldiers travel throughout the continents of Europe and Asia, they encounter other deserters who are punished far more harshly than an American deserter like Cacciato would be: Van, who's sentenced to life beneath the ground, and here, the soldier who is to be executed. These episodes in the novel are important, because they remind us of the specific national themes at play—Cacciato's decision to leave the American military (and perhaps the other soldiers' decisions too) is based on his experience in a specifically American culture and society.

Berlin watches, unable to look away, as the young man's head is pushed to a block. The young man's face looks terrified. He stares at a fly, so intently that he seems not to notice when the "hooded axeman" steps forward. The narrator doesn't describe the beheading of the man, but simply says, "it ended." The crowd cheers, and music plays from loudspeakers.

As always, O'Brien jumps over the most gruesome parts of his novel, so there's no actual description of the man losing his head. This mirrors the process of repression and trauma that O'Brien dramatizes through the soldiers' experience in Vietnam.

After the beheading, the soldiers go to get drunk at a local bar. Stink, in contrast to the other soldiers, seems amused by the beheading, and seems certain that the boy was a murderer who deserved what he got. After drinking, the soldiers go off to look for dinner, but instead, the narrator repeats, "they were arrested."

Stink has shown himself to be cold-hearted and even sociopathic before (as in the scene with the buffalo), but this doesn't automatically prove him a less "moral" person than, say, Berlin—rather, it suggests that he's coping with his experiences in Vietnam in a different, more violent way than are the other soldiers.

The soldiers blame their arrest, the narrator explains, on each other: Eddie blames Stink, Oscar blames Eddie, etc. Eddie makes the mistake of asking a local man if he knows where to find good clams for dinner. The local man turns out to be a police officer, who recognizes that the group of men isn't from Tehran. Finding that they have no Afghan identification papers, he brings them in to the police station.

Here, it would seem, O'Brien is injecting a little reality back into the novel. After hundreds of pages in which the soldiers avoid every legal setback in their journeys through other countries, they're finally forced to confront the basic illegality of what they're doing.

At the police station, the soldiers are introduced to Sergeant Ulam—the officer who brought them in—and Captain Fahyi Rhallon, who will be interrogating the soldiers. Rhallon seems remarkably polite, and he asks to see the soldiers' passports. Doc is polite in return, and explains that none of the soldiers have passports. Doc continues that he and his friends are touring soldiers. Rhallon seems to believe Doc, and adds that Doc should have explained this immediately. Rhallon orders sandwiches and tea for the soldiers, and they accept without hesitation. Rhallon notices Sarkin—still traveling with the soldiers, and clearly not a soldier. He asks Doc how it's possible for soldiers to travel without passports. Without pausing at all, Doc insists that the United Nations' Mutual Military Travel Pact of 1965 allows soldiers to travel across international lines without identification. Rhallon nods and says that he is foolish, and ignorant of this law—but it's not clear if he's being serious. Doc adds that Sarkin is under "temporary escort"—a service that's also laid out in the U.N.'s laws. Rhallon nods and tells the soldiers that they can go. He even apologizes for his "unseemly error," and offers to buy the soldiers drinks.

Just when it seemed that O'Brien/Berlin was being harshly realistic about the soldiers' situation, there is another deus ex machina *(literally, "god from the machine," or an unlikely event that suddenly resolves the story's problems). Doc is able to talk his way out of prison—a highly implausible turn of events that hinges on the Captain's willingness to believe in a Geneva Code that's clearly being made up on the spot. In all, the section is comical (as most of the sections involving Doc Peret are—he's the closest thing in the novel to a comic relief character), but with an undercurrent of menace. We get the sense that Captain Rhallon doesn't entirely trust the soldiers, even if he's being polite to them. O'Brien also takes this opportunity to remind us that Sarkin is still a part of the group—like many of the characters in the novel, she's present throughout the mission, but often goes many pages without appearing.*

Captain Rhallon takes the soldiers to a bar that plays loud American music, and he orders beers for everyone. He asks Doc and Eddie to tell him about the war from which they've come. Doc replies that there's nothing to tell—war is war. Captain Rhallon, smiling, disagrees, and points out that each soldier sees a different side of the war. Doc clarifies his position—the Vietnam War, he insists, is no different from any other American war, despite those who insist it's a far cry from World War II.

In this important section, Rhallon and Doc give us some insight into the dynamics of the Vietnam War, as well as their own personalities. Doc takes a detached, historical view of the war—but he clearly wants to conflate Vietnam with WWII as an equally "just" war. On another level, however, his words imply that all war is essentially the same in its violence and horror.

Rhallon and Doc continue discussing the war in Vietnam. Doc insists that soldiers shouldn't concern themselves with the purpose or goal of a war—a soldier's business is to follow directions, and survive. Rhallon takes a more abstract view of war in general. He thinks a war must be judged by its principles—that is, a country's reasons for going to battle. He argues that a soldier cannot fight a war properly—cannot focus on survival—if he doesn't understand why his country is at war. As they talk, Eddie and Stink dance in the bar.

Rhallon's perspective on Vietnam is the more realistic and accurate one. To say that the war in Vietnam is unjust means that it was fought for essentially immoral reasons—preserving America's national pride and economic standing in competition with the USSR. O'Brien has then shown how the immorality of the war trickles down to influence the way soldiers behave. At the same time, Doc has a point, too—in such conditions, a soldier's first order of business is often survival, not morality.

Rhallon asks Doc about his soldiers' mission, and Doc explains that they're traveling to **Paris** to hunt down Cacciato. Rhallon nods—if Cacciato is indeed a deserter, he says, then he must be punished severely, like a dog. Strangely, Lieutenant Corson, who has been listening to Rhallon and Doc's conversation, seems to scoff at the idea that their mission is extremely important. "What difference does it make?" he asks aloud.

Lieutenant Corson seems to be getting healthier and healthier following his departure from Vietnam. At the beginning of the book he was almost dying, and seemed virtually senile. Here, he seems both energetic and strikingly realistic about the mission to recover Cacciato, as he recognizes that it will serve no real purpose. This is ironic, since it was Corson who insisted on the mission in the first place.

As the other soldiers dance and argue, Paul Berlin dances with Sarkin. Berlin overhears Doc telling Captain Rhallon "the ultimate war story"—the story of how Billy Boy Watkins died. Berlin feels sick, and tunes out Doc's words. Sarkin points out the obvious fact Berlin is very drunk. Sarkin kisses Berlin, and tells him that Doc's story is "silly."

O'Brien uses a strategy similar to the one he used to describe the beheading in Tehran. He creates a sense of anticipation by describing a "pregnant absence"—we don't know exactly what the war story in question is, but we know that it's both horrific and important to Berlin's career as a soldier.

CHAPTER 30

It is 4 AM, and Berlin is keeping watch. Less than an hour remains before dawn. He thinks about his experiences in Tehran, and tries to explain how he came to witness a public beheading. He remembers something Doc Peret once told him: the human mind thinks in terms of cycles. For a long time, Berlin has been trapped in a cycle of searching for Cacciato. In order to break out of a cycle, one must be strong and focused. He wonders if there's any pattern or meaning in the things he's witnessed in Tehran, Delhi, and Mandalay, or if these events—like the world itself—are random.

The doctrine of cycles is important for understanding this novel. Instead of moving from point A to point B, O'Brien circles back to examine and reexamine the same events in more and more detail. This process mirrors the way the human mind works—when a person is obsessed about something, he or she revisits the topic again and again, in a way that's never entirely satisfactory. Here, it's suggested that Berlin is still consumed with thoughts about Cacciato, long after the mission ends.

To help himself make sense of his situation, Berlin decides to think about his early days as a soldier, and how he came to witness "the ultimate war story."

Once again the "observation post" is the place for Berlin to obsessively reminisce and reimagine.

CHAPTER 31

The chapter concerns Paul Berlin's early experiences in the army. He and the other soldiers of his platoon are marching single file through the jungle and mountains, occasionally seeing a rice paddy. Berlin dreams of the day that the soldiers will reach the sea—then, he thinks, there will be no more marching. In the meantime, the soldiers entertain themselves by singing and telling jokes.

The two main storylines—the story of Berlin's pursuit of Cacciato, and the "frame story" in which Berlin sits near the beach—are beginning to come together. It seems that Berlin and his fellow soldiers are sent to a fort near the sea in Vietnam after they finish going after Cacciato.

Berlin thinks about the death of Billy Boy Watkins, which has happened only a few days ago. Doc Peret—who isn't Berlin's friend yet—confirms that Billy Boy died of a heart attack. Berlin, who seems terrified of Billy Boy's death, imagines explaining the incident to his father, and shrugging as if to say, "not so bad."

One reason why Billy Boy's death is so terrifying for Doc, and later for Berlin, is that it's completely unpredictable. Moreover, it's "self-imposed": it's Billy Boy's own fear that kills him, rather than anything tangible like a bomb or bullet. This reinforces one of O'Brien's key points: often the soldier's greatest enemy is himself.

Paul Berlin tries to concentrate on forgetting the details of Billy Boy's death, but the harder he tries, the more difficult it becomes. He tells himself "not to take it personally." As he marches through the forest, Berlin strikes up a conversation with Cacciato, who is chewing his favorite gum. Cacciato has been a soldier for longer than Berlin, and he tells Berlin that he'll soon adjust to life in the war. As Cacciato and Berlin talk, Berlin imagines a telegraph telling Billy Boy's father that his son has been "Scared to death." Berlin finds that he can't stop laughing and giggling.

It's still not clear what Cacciato's mental state is. He's called a simpleton many times, but seems more or less mentally stable in this section. The difficulty of pinning down Cacciato's personality points to a general quality of the text: because the novel is written from Berlin's point of view, it's often hard to understand what the other characters are thinking, and even to trust the reliability of the events being narrated

Berlin continues laughing, and as he laughs, he remembers the day that Billy Boy died. The men were sitting around, drinking soda and fooling around with their guns, shooting at the cans of soda. Suddenly, Billy walked away from the soldiers, and accidentally triggered a land mine. Amazingly, the mine didn't kill Billy—indeed, it left him virtually unharmed. The mine ripped off his foot, but didn't seem to hurt him at all—at least not at first. Berlin remembers Doc Peret telling Billy, "War's over. That's a million-dollar wound."

For the second time in the novel, a land mine fails to kill the person who sets it off. We can almost sense that this incident gave Berlin the idea for the smoke bomb that spares his fellow troops' lives in the first chapter of the book. Doc Peret, upbeat as always, sees the bright sight in what is, admittedly, a gruesome injury.

Berlin continues to remember Billy Boy's death. After losing his foot, Billy Boy felt a sudden rush of pain. Billy Boy gritted his teeth and rocked his head back and forth, seemingly unable to speak. Suddenly, his body went slack. Doc Peret touched Billy Boy's chest, and checked for a pulse. He reported, with great surprise, that Billy Boy was dead—apparently of a sudden heart attack. Doc claims that he's seen people "scared to death" before. The other soldiers nod and wrap Billy Boy up in a body bag. They radio for a helicopter, and before the long, the helicopter arrives to carry Billy Boy's body away.

Billy Boy's death is so terrifying because it's so normal: *it could happen to any one of the soldiers in squad three. It's impossible not to be afraid as a soldier in Vietnam, and only Cacciato seems endowed with a mystical sense of calmness. In other words, every soldier in the novel is in danger of coming to the same sudden end as Billy Boy. This, ultimately, is what makes the story so disturbing for Berlin.*

As the incident of Billy Boy's death ends, the soldiers resume their business. Eddie sings humorous songs about Billy Boy, and Cacciato offers Berlin a stick of his prized Black Jack gum. He tells Berlin, "You'll do fine. You will. You got a terrific sense of humor."

Humor, many of the characters argue, is the only way to deal with the horrors of Vietnam. But we recognize that this isn't the whole story—there are some horrors that are simply too big to be spoken of at all.

CHAPTER 32

It is 4:30 AM. Berlin sits, keeping watch and thinking about Billy Boy. He decides that there's nothing especially interesting or important about the fact that Billy Boy is dead. Berlin eats a can of pears, and when he's finished with it, he throws the can towards the beach.

It's often hard to understand Berlin's "character arc" in this story—how does he change as a person from the novel's start to its finish? While O'Brien doesn't answer this question overtly, he suggests that Berlin makes progress by telling himself stories—convincing himself that, for instance, Billy Boy's death isn't *scary, until this story becomes the truth.*

CHAPTER 33

The narrator reports that the soldiers are arrested for a second time in Tehran, early on the morning of February 10th. Paul Berlin spends the next eight days alone in a prison cell, wondering what is happening to his friends. After this time, Berlin is handcuffed and brought into a large room, along with Stink, Eddie, Doc, Oscar, and Corson. Sarkin is thrown into this room as well. She kisses Berlin's throat. Berlin sees that there are guards preventing him from escaping.

Sarkin's kiss (on Berlin's throat) is a little ominous, since Berlin knows that criminals can be beheaded for their crimes in Tehran. Sarkin provides Berlin with support and (presumably) sexual pleasure, but she's still a strangely menacing character, with her own interests in mind and no real love for Berlin.

Inside his new prison room, Berlin asks Oscar why they were arrested. Before Oscar can answer, Captain Rhallon walks through the door. He apologizes profusely for the soldiers' arrest, but admits that he doesn't know what he can do to help them. Their situation, he claims, is "grave"—grave, he clarifies, as in "shaved head" grave. Thallon tells his "friends" that they've been arrested for desertion. He produces a dossier, which says that Doc and his fellow soldiers do *not* have the legal right to travel through Tehran, as Doc had claimed. In the meantime, the soldiers also face charges for carrying dangerous weapons—automatic firearms, grenades, knives, bayonets, etc.

Rhallon had seemed like a sinister character in the earlier chapters, despite his politeness, and our impression of him is confirmed here. Rhallon continues to be polite, but his politeness amounts to nothing—he's perfectly willing to have the soldiers beheaded. Once again, it seems that the soldiers can't run from the reality of their actions any longer—or, to put it another way, Berlin can't imagine his way out of this situation without dipping into the fantastical.

Doc tries to explain his soldiers' situation to Captain Rhallon: they are American infantry, assigned to capture a runaway soldier named Cacciato. Rhallon asks for Cacciato's first name, but—as the narrator has already established—nobody knows it. Rhallon says that Doc and the soldiers seem to be the runaways—not the mysterious Cacciato. Rhallon points out the soldiers' situation: they have no legal entitlement to be in Tehran, they have no evidence verifying their story, they have almost no information about the man they're supposed to be chasing, and they have no license for their weapons. Rhallon promises to argue on the soldiers' behalf, but also urges them to pray in the meantime.

Rhallon makes explicit what the soldiers have been thinking for some time now: they have no business chasing after Cacciato, since they're essentially deserters themselves. It's unusual that Lieutenant Corson doesn't speak up in this scene—as a commander of other soldiers, and one who has contact with higher ranking commanders, he could seemingly provide Rhallon with a far more convincing story than the one Doc invents. But Corson is silent—as he usually is.

As Berlin waits for Rhallon's help, he thinks back on his past. He played baseball games as a boy, and did fairly well in school. At times, he thought of studying at the University of Iowa. During his two years in junior college at Centerville, Berlin was unsatisfied, and told his counselor that he was going to drop out—a choice, the counselor reminded him, that would almost guarantee him a spot in the military.

We see that Berlin's decision to join the army and fight in Vietnam really was a choice. This may seem obvious, but in fact the majority of people who fought in Vietnam had no desire to do so. The government reinstated the draft, forcing all young men to register for military service.

Shortly after the soldiers' discussion with Captain Rhallon, they're taken to a larger, more comfortable cell, which has sofas and rugs. They spend a great deal of time in this place—it could be hours or days. After an undetermined time, guards enter the room and explain that they're going to shave the soldiers. As the guards proceed to shave everyone, Rhallon enters the room. He simply says, "I'm sorry. I did try." He tells the soldiers that their government either isn't aware of their presence in Tehran, or doesn't want to acknowledge them. The "outcome" will take place tomorrow, but in the intervening time, a pardon might still be possible. With these words, Rhallon leaves the room.

Rhallon continues to promise the soldiers that there's a slim chance of their being acquitted of the charges of desertion, but we sense that he's merely being polite—he's just trying to make the soldiers' last hours on the earth a little more optimistic. Once again time seems like a fluid thing, and the whole situation feels dreamlike.

Shortly after Rhallon's departure, another officer enters the soldiers' cell. He points at Oscar Johnson and orders him to remove his sunglasses and step on them. Oscar refuses, and the officer responds by hitting Oscar on the nose, very hard. Oscar falls to the floor. Paul Berlin can't stop smiling and giggling—something which annoys the officer considerably. Stink mutters that the officer is a Nazi. The officer hits Stink and tells the soldiers that they will confess to deserting. The narrator simplifies what happens next: the soldiers admit deserting and say, "We ran." The officer also orders them to admit that their "mission" to recover Cacciato was a lie. The soldiers "confess" this as well. Finally, the officer tells the soldiers to admit that it is impossible to walk all the way to **Paris**. The soldiers do so.

As usual, Berlin responds to a traumatic situation by laughing uncontrollably—he seems to have taken Doc's advice to heart. It's interesting that the torture and confession scene is framed as a conflict between truth and fiction: the torturer wants the soldiers to admit that their story is just a fiction. This is almost automatically an antagonistic point of view in a novel about how fiction can change and improve reality. The most painful "confession" seems to be saying that it's impossible to walk to Paris—a possibility that Berlin and the other soldiers have been restating throughout the book.

CHAPTER 34

At the beginning of Berlin's military service, shortly after the deaths of Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn, Oscar Johnson is arguing with Sidney Martin. Martin wants to follow standard operating procedure by sending one soldier to explore the **tunnels** before blowing them up. Johnson points out that this is suicidal—it guarantees that one soldier in the squad will die. Martin responds by ordering Johnson to explore the next tunnel—an order that Johnson promptly refuses. Martin nods and writes Johnson's name in his book. Martin asks each soldier to go down into the tunnel, and each one refuses. Cacciato, meanwhile, is fishing for food in the nearby river, and isn't present. Martin goes to clear the tunnel himself. He climbs down, and before long, there is a hard "thump."

The novel keeps returning to the same point, that Sidney Martin was essentially executing his own troops by forcing them to evacuate tunnels before blowing them up. It remains to be seen what the real importance of this scene is, but we can sense that it plays an important part in Berlin's career as a soldier. Cacciato again remains strangely innocent—he's fishing by himself, showing his lack of close ties to the community of soldiers in which Berlin is already involved

As the soldiers wait for Martin to emerge—or not emerge—from the **tunnel**, they discuss what has just happened. Martin has written everyone's name down (except for Cacciato), marking them as traitors. Oscar produces a grenade from his belt and tells the soldiers that "it's all about preservation." Jim Pederson points out that the soldiers could wait for Martin to emerge from the tunnel, and attempt to reason with him. Oscar disagrees—Martin is too rigid in his thinking for any kind of compromise.

Oscar's argument is that the soldiers have to look out for their own survival needs. This is a deceptively simple point. While it's true that survival is key, Oscar doesn't talk about the mental challenges involved with murdering another human being—the soldiers will have to live with their choice to murder Martin for the rest of their lives.

While Lieutenant Sidney Martin is in the **tunnel**, Oscar raises his grenade. He tells everyone present to touch the grenade as a sign of support. He passes it around the group, and each soldier touches it. Berlin is the last to touch the grenade—he's been trying to forget where he is by thinking about his childhood in Wisconsin. When every soldier has touched the grenade, Oscar asks where Cacciato is. Vaught reports that he's still fishing. Oscar wants Berlin to summon Cacciato as soon as possible, but some of the soldiers object that there isn't enough time. In the midst of the soldiers' argument, Martin emerges from the hole—it's clear. Oscar nods, and respectfully asks Martin for permission to blow up the tunnel. He tosses the grenade into the tunnel, and there's a loud explosion.

O'Brien plots this chapter cleverly, building suspense to the point where we expect Johnson to kill Sidney Martin with the grenade. The chapter is almost a self-contained short story, and indeed, before writing novels, O'Brien specialized in this literary form. As we learn more about the incident, we also learn more about Oscar—it's a little chilling how easily he alternates between plotting the murder of Sidney Martin and obsequiously asking Martin for permission to detonate the grenade inside the tunnel.

CHAPTER 35

Paul Berlin and Cacciato are fishing together, shortly after the events of the last chapter. Cacciato complains that there are no fish to catch. Berlin warns Cacciato that he's spending too much time fishing—if he's not careful, he'll catch cold, at least according to Doc Peret.

In the Bible, fishing is a symbol of the process of Christian conversion. Thus, Cacciato's complaint that there are no fish to catch might suggest his sense that the "souls" of the men around him have been lost to evil.

Suddenly, Berlin produces a grenade and tells Cacciato that the soldiers want Cacciato to touch it. Cacciato seems to understand what Berlin is saying, but doesn't touch the grenade. Instead, he focuses on fishing. Berlin brings the grenade to Cacciato's hand, forcing him to touch it. Then, as Cacciato continues to fish, Berlin walks back to the other soldiers and hands Oscar the grenade. Berlin explains that Cacciato touched the grenade, but that he's too busy fishing to focus on anything—his mind is "a million miles away." Oscar nods and says, "That's everyone."

Cacciato clearly doesn't know what he's assenting to by touching the grenade, and yet his touch is enough for Johnson and for Berlin. The illusion of group unity is so important to Johnson in his plot to kill Martin that he doesn't care that it's just *an illusion—he doesn't care that Cacciato doesn't really give assent. We now begin to understand why the soldiers wanted to hunt down Cacciato in the first place: they couldn't let the man who knew about their murder escape.*

CHAPTER 36

It is midnight, on the night before the soldiers are scheduled to be executed in Tehran. The soldiers' necks are shaved once again. They're fed, and then sent to a shower stall where they're washed and cleaned. Then they're sent back to their cell. There, Doc and Oscar write letters, while most of the soldiers sleep. Paul Berlin can't sleep—he stays up, wondering what will happen next. Eventually he falls asleep, thinking of his mother and father.

As the chapter begins, the soldiers are about to be executed for desertion. We can assume, however, that O'Brien (or rather, Berlin) will think of an appropriate deus ex machina *(sudden, unexpected narrative device that solves the problems of a story) to save them.*

In his dreams, Berlin imagines Cacciato's round face. Suddenly, he feels Sarkin shaking him awake. Sarkin tells him that he needs to go, immediately. Berlin imagines Cacciato whispering, "Go." There's a sudden explosion, and the gate of the cell blows open. Berlin and his fellow soldiers race out of the cell, following by the sound of gunfire.

It's impossible to tell what's really happening and what's happening in Berlin's mind—which suggests that it's all *happening in Berlin's mind, probably as he sits alone at the observation post by the sea.*

Berlin runs away from his cell. Outside, he continues running, and imagines a getaway car, too—"why not?" he thinks. Oscar drives everyone away from the prison. Berlin sits with Sarkin in the back seat. Oscar drives through Tehran, eventually driving onto a huge traffic loop. Suddenly, the soldiers notice a tank, carrying a squad of soldiers, pursuing their car. Oscar manages to drive away from the tank while avoiding fire.

O'Brien now makes it more clear that Berlin is imagining all this at a later time. The phrase, "Why not?" suggests that Berlin is literally making up on the spot the story of how he and the other soldiers escape from prison. As O'Brien becomes more transparent about the levels of reality within his novel, we are meant to re-examine past events in light of this knowledge.

The soldiers continue to drive away from their pursuers. They're silent, but extremely tense. Berlin looks out the window of the car and sees the stars and the mountains in the distance. He remembers the vote the soldiers took—everyone touched the grenade. The only exception was Cacciato—while he "touched" the grenade, he gave few signs of understanding what he was being asked to support. As Berlin considers this, Oscar drives the car across the border—the soldiers have arrived in Turkey. Shortly before dawn, they arrive in Ankara.

Berlin's awareness of the past and present come together in this scene—he's thinking about Cacciato's lack of support for the soldiers' murder of Martin, and he's also thinking about the soldiers' long, misguided quest to find Cacciato. It's as if the soldiers want to arrest Cacciato to "bring him down to earth"—to prove to themselves that he's no more moral and "pure" a person than they are.

Oscar tells Berlin to take the wheel while he gets some rest. Berlin obliges. They drive for hours, until they reach "the sea." Berlin murmurs "It can be done," and Doc agrees with him.

At this point in the text, the words "It can be done" are like a mantra for Berlin and the other soldiers. It is the far-fetched idea of someone walking from Vietnam to Paris that keeps Berlin going, both in his imagined story and in his attempts to stay sane and hopeful in reality.

CHAPTER 37

The chapter opens, "What Paul Berlin knew best was land." He knows the land of Quang Ngai (the site of his seaside observation post) extremely well—he knows the dangerous and safe places, and he knows which areas correspond to which kinds of farmland. He's interested in rice paddies, which remind him of the hedgerows in Iowa. Berlin also knows a great deal about trails. Often it's best to stay off the trails, since trails are easy to ambush.

We've already been told that the real danger of Vietnam is the land itself, and seen it swallow up an entire squad of soldiers. That Paul Berlin feels a special kinship with the land suggests his past attraction to Sarkin, his growing affinity for war, and the fine line between the familiar and the foreign.

Berlin acquaints himself with the village of Quang Ngai, near which he and his fellow soldiers are stationed. It's a small village, which has been burned and largely destroyed by war. But the village overlooks the sea, which makes Berlin think of the future, of escape, and of **Paris**.

Berlin and the other soldiers have been stationed in a small village overlooking the sea. The village is a monument to the destructive powers of the U.S. military, and yet it also makes Berlin think of Paris, a symbol of man's capacity for peace and understanding.

CHAPTER 38

The chapter opens with the soldiers stationed in Izmir (a city in Turkey). From Izmir, they have little trouble arranging ship's passage to Athens. Oscar makes the proper arrangements under the table in various taverns in the city. The passage to Athens is remarkably calm—indeed, Lieutenant Corson's health improves with the sun and fresh sea air. Sarkin is largely responsible for restoring Corson's health, as well. She spends long periods of time with him, laughing and joking. She even reminds him of his responsibilities, saying, "A leader must lead."

As the book goes on, the soldiers' exploits become easier, not harder. They seem to have no trouble organizing a trip to Athens (O'Brien doesn't even bother to explain how they did it), and even Corson is doing better—the farther he is from Vietnam, the happier and healthier he seems to become. We sense that Sarkin is shifting her allegiance from Berlin to Corson.

On the second day of the soldiers' passage to Athens, the ship prepares to dock in the city of Piraeus. The soldiers are preparing to disembark and stroll around when they notice a group of police officers, who seem to be trying to match faces to photographs. Oscar concludes that the officers are looking for them. Stink swears, and Doc mutters, "We came so close." Stink begs Oscar to think of something, but Oscar can only shake his head. Frightened of being arrested, Stink jumps into the water, just as the ship is pulling to land. Berlin stares into the water, catches a glimpse of Stink, and then finds that he can't see Stink at all.

We end the chapter with yet another crisis—one which Stink is afraid to confront. At this point, however, we sense that Berlin will, as usual, find a way to resolve the crisis and keep the soldiers on their way to Paris. It's interesting that the soldiers seem perfectly aware of how lucky they've been in traveling to Paris. This may be a fantastical story, but the soldiers still judge their journey by the standards of the real world.

CHAPTER 39

Earlier in 1968, when Berlin, Stink, and the other soldiers were busy patrolling the village of Quang Ngai, Stink garnered a reputation for being cruel and intimidating to the villagers. He would yell at the women and children. None of the soldiers could be truly gentle with the villagers, however, because none of them knew the language—they had no way of determining what the people wanted, or what they respected. Worst of all, the soldiers had no way of building trust with the villagers—everyone was a potential enemy.

In this interlude, O'Brien reminds us of the atmosphere of confusion and chaos in Vietnam. Almost all of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam have said the same thing: it was impossible to tell who was a friend and who was a foe. As a result, the soldiers chose to assume that everyone was an enemy—a good assumption when it came to surviving, but also one which led to a great deal of horrific, unnecessary violence.

Berlin privately wonders about the villagers whom he and his fellow soldiers are threatening. Some of them are young and innocent looking—indeed, some of them are only children. He also wonders what the villagers think of him—if, for example, they think of him as a frightened, foolish boy from Iowa. He imagines returning to the village of Quang Ngai, years from now. Perhaps he'll be able to find some of the people whom he bullied and threatened, and apologize to them.

It's suggested here that Berlin had wanted to return to Quang Ngai—the same town where he's sitting in the "observation post" frame chapters. We sense that Berlin, at this stage in his military career, still seeks forgiveness for his actions. It's not clear if Berlin is still in this mindset in the "observation post" chapters, or if his time in Vietnam has hardened him.

In September, Paul Berlin is summoned before the battalion promotion board. At the board, Berlin learns that he's up for a promotion: he'll be assigned to Spec Four, where he'll be given more responsibility, and more dangerous tasks to complete. A gruff sergeant at the board mocks Berlin's "German-sounding" name, and asks him some questions. Some are easy ("How many stars on the flag?"; "Who's the Secretary of Defense?") Others are more abstract, such as, "Why are we fighting this war?" Berlin isn't sure how to answer this question. Eventually he says, "To win it." The sergeant asks Berlin one final question, "What effect would the death of Ho Chi Minh have on the population of North Vietnam?" Berlin smiled, knowing he's won his promotion, and answers, "Reduce it by one, sir."

The intentional obtuseness of Berlin's answer to the question, "Why are we fighting this war?" confirms what Captain Rhallon said about the Vietnam War in an earlier chapter—it's being waged without any real understanding of right and wrong. Soldiers are simply told to follow orders, irrespective of whether or not they grasp the goals behind them. This is the case in any war, but the effect was particularly pronounced in Vietnam, where even high-ranking military commanders didn't understand the purpose of the war they were fighting.

The narrator notes that in Quang Ngai, soldiers do not talk about politics. Indeed, they tend to talk about the simplest, most trivial things, and nothing else. In short, the chapter concludes, the soldiers "did not know good from evil."

A question worth asking is: without the knowledge of good and evil, can one still do evil? O'Brien's answer is yes, judging by the carnage in the village.

CHAPTER 40

The chapter begins immediately after the events of Chapter 38. The narrator explains that Berlin and his fellow soldiers "would not have been captured" in Greece. Berlin and his fellow soldiers have fantasized about their freedom and their lives after the army, and being arrested, the narrator insists, simply isn't a part of their fantasy. Thus, when the soldiers disembark, still carrying their guns, they walk directly past the police officers without being detected. The next day, they climb aboard the ship again and sail to Athens. There, the soldiers make the usual inquiries about Cacciato, searching taverns and other similar places. Again, they find no evidence of Cacciato's presence. They also find no evidence of Stink, and it's not clear what happened to him after he jumped off the ship. After a few days in Athens, the soldiers make their way to the Greek-Yugoslavian border. In Yugoslavia, they manage to hitch a ride with a girl who's from California. The girl drives them across the country.

The title of this chapter is one of O'Brien's most overt nods to the meta-textual character of his writing. He makes no secret of the fact that his story isn't realistic. Even the phrasing of his explanation of how the soldiers remained free provides a blatant reminder of how O'Brien lets what "should" happen dictate what "does" happen in his novel. Because he's writing from the perspective of Berlin, the scenes unfold the way a young soldier might imagine them—thus, the soldiers aren't *arrested for desertion, they aren't punished for their actions, and they continue on their journey to Paris, meeting another woman along the way.*

The girl who drives the soldiers across Yugoslavia tells them that she's impressed by their courage—they've clearly seen evil and "walked away." The girl explains that she's a former student at San Diego State, and a strong opponent of the war in Vietnam—as are the soldiers, she assumes. She drives her passengers to a small village, stationed far from any major cities. The village, the girl explains, is made up entirely of people who are sympathetic to deserters. They'll help Berlin and his friends get airplane tickets, jobs, passports, and anything else they need.

In this section, O'Brien conveys the sometimes depressing gap between the anti-war movement in America and the Vietnam soldiers themselves. Although anti-war protesters claimed to support Vietnamese soldiers, they were often of such different worlds that there could be no real communication or common ground between them. Here, the girl acts as if she knows and understands the soldiers, but completely misinterprets their reason for leaving Vietnam: the squad still remembers its evil actions, especially the murder of Sidney Martin (an event which is heavily implied, but never explicitly shown).

As the girl drives the soldiers past her village, Oscar abruptly raises his rifle and orders the girl to stop. She does, smiling the entire time, and tells Oscar that there's no need for him to rape her—she'll gladly have sex with him voluntarily. Oscar orders the girl to get out of the car, and she does, still smiling. Oscar takes the wheel, and he and the other soldiers drive her car away. As the girl recedes into the distance, Doc says, "sometimes I do feel a little guilt."

Doc's reaction could be a "punch line" to this brief episode in the novel, except that it's brutally cruel. Oscar Johnson has stolen from a woman who's been nothing but generous to him—and none of the other soldiers seem morally perturbed by Johnson's actions. The soldiers' experiences in Vietnam have hardened them considerably.

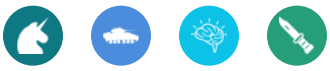
Oscar drives the soldiers and Sarkin into Germany. They pass by the Danube. "It was easy," the narrator maintains. Berlin is excited to reach **Paris**. He imagines clean, neat rooms and beautiful buildings. He considers that the war in Vietnam was probably fought in the interest of these precise things—culture and order. While he acknowledges that it's possible that this intention was misinterpreted or botched somehow, the intention itself was a good one. Early in the morning, the soldiers reach a train station, and the train takes them into Luxembourg.

The chapter ends with this almost gentle passage—it's "easy," apparently, for the soldiers to make their way into Germany. With each new country hat they explore, the soldiers have an easier time journeying on to the next one. They're now only a few hundred miles away from their final destination, Paris. What they'll find in the idealized, seemingly mystical Paris remains to be seen, however.

CHAPTER 41

The chapter begins in the midst of a battle, which keeps getting larger and more complicated. When the battle finally ends, Paul Berlin, Cacciato, and Eddie Lazzutti patrol the area, searching for bodies. They find the body of a fellow soldier, Water Buffalo, or Buff, whose body seems to be placed in the position of Muslim prayer. As Berlin stares at the body, he tries to think of pleasant things—his father raking leaves, for example. The soldiers send up a flare, signaling for a helicopter to take Buff's body away.

Even at this late stage in the novel, O'Brien is introducing us to new characters, reminding us that Berlin's story is only one of the hundreds of thousands of stories of Vietnam soldiers. We now understand that Berlin uses his imagination as a kind of defense mechanism—he invents pleasantries to cover up the harsh realities he encounters as a young soldier.



After the helicopter takes Buff's body away from the battlegrounds, Doc suggests that they look through Buff's helmet—where he kept his most valuable items. Cacciato goes to rummage through Buff's helmet. He finds a stick of gum, which he proceeds to chew. Oscar Johnson tells the soldiers the "lesson" of Buff's death—"Don' never get shot."

Oscar Johnson is a strict realist, who considers survival in the most literal, physical terms. Johnson seems to be unconcerned with the question of guilt, however—as long as he can survive the war, he's willing to do anything and kill anyone.

CHAPTER 42

At an unspecified time, Berlin sits at his tower, overlooking the ocean. He thinks about the soldiers he befriended during his early months in the war. Even now, Berlin isn't sure what he can "take away" from war. He's only learned simple, obvious lessons, like "Don't get shot." He checks his wristwatch and sees that it's 5 AM. The sun is beginning to shine. Berlin wonders where Cacciato will take them—how far could he possibly go?

The notion of a "takeaway" strikes Berlin—and O'Brien—as a little ridiculous. There can be no easy lesson from an event as big, profoundly sad, and complicated as the war in Vietnam. Rather, the only way to paint a picture of Vietnam is piece together small, often unrelated fragments of soldiers' experiences—just as O'Brien does in this book.

CHAPTER 43

It is April, 1969, and the soldiers are in Luxembourg, boarding a train for **Paris**. The train ride is only four hours—a fact that baffles Paul Berlin, who's been thinking back on the soldiers' journey from Vietnam. They've been traveling for more than six months. Berlin is enormously excited to reach Paris.

Berlin is understandably excited to reach Paris, as he's been dreaming about going there for months. It's not clear what he'll do in Paris, however, or whether or not he'll encounter Cacciato one final time.

The train ride draws to a close, and Berlin looks through his window to see the outer city of **Paris**. There are farms and old buildings, many of which have been destroyed in the chaos of World War II. Then, Berlin sees the famous sights of Paris: Gothic cathedrals, handsome bridges, bakeries—in all, the city looms before Berlin "like a ghost." As the train pulls into its station, Berlin and the other soldiers hide their weapons and prepare to disembark.

O'Brien's description of Paris isn't so dissimilar from his descriptions of Cacciato—Paris is ghostly and unreal, both familiar and alien to Berlin and his friends. This seems natural, especially as we now assume that Berlin never went to Paris at all, and is still imagining his idealized version of the city.

Berlin, Sarkin, and the other soldiers leave their train and begin their stay in **Paris**. Berlin notes that the city looks strangely blurry—as though he's in a dream. But Berlin knows this is no dream—"it's all real." The soldiers begin staying in a hotel near the Italian embassy. Doc points out that nobody will believe the soldiers' story of tracking down Cacciato, unless they succeed in capturing Cacciato. Berlin recognizes that Doc is correct, but finds it hard to focus on his task when the city of Paris is so beautiful. He and Sarkin (who stills calls him "Spec Four") stroll through the streets, laughing and staring out at the Seine (the principal river of Paris).

We've come to a point where even Berlin himself can't distinguish between what's real and what isn't. As usual, Doc provides a voice of (almost) reason: the troops' only chance now is to hunt down Cacciato and present him to the proper authorities. Yet Berlin and Sarkin are too obsessed with Paris to spend the entire day looking for Cacciato—they want to enjoy the city.

The soldiers proceed with their search for Cacciato, but their pace is leisurely. They enjoy sitting in French salons and listening to accordion music. They eat at cheap restaurants and drink fine wine. Somehow, the narrator notes, "Money was never a problem," and "passports were never required."

"Money was never a problem" sums up O'Brien's brand of magical realism—he ignores all the implausibility of his story, while also drawing our attention to this very implausibility. We recognize that his story is fantastic, to the point where we see that it must be Berlin's own invention.

One day, Sarkin suggests that she and Paul Berlin move into an apartment in **Paris**. Berlin is interested in this idea, but he insists that he has to capture Cacciato before he can do anything else. Sarkin tells Berlin that he should forget his friends and concentrate on his new life in Paris. Berlin continues to express his reluctance. This angers Sarkin. She tells Berlin that he's a coward, and urges him to make up his mind immediately. Reluctantly, Berlin agrees to tell Doc and the others about his plans to live in an apartment with Sarkin.

The inevitable conflict between Sarkin and Berlin erupts: Sarkin wants Berlin to leave the military, while Berlin is too loyal to his troops to leave them overnight. This reminds us how far Berlin has come in only a few months: he's developed a close bond with the soldiers by virtue of having spent so much pivotal time with them. The tension between obligation (duty) and escape (deserting in Paris) is especially powerful here.

In the coming days, Berlin and Sarkin look for apartments in **Paris**. Some are "impossible," while others are both charming and affordably priced. They eventually find an apartment with a beautiful view of the city, and Sarkin proposes that they buy it. Berlin agrees, but tells Sarkin that he has to tell Lieutenant Corson before he buys a place to live. Sarkin agrees, and notes, "Isn't it better to hunt apartments than people?"

Again, money isn't a problem for Berlin and Sarkin, and they can buy whatever they want, within reason. Sarkin's words seem sincere and emotional, yet there's also an undercurrent of manipulation in them. Berlin feels that he can't just give up on his friends and peers, even if Sarkin wants him to do so.

Shortly after their apartment visit, Berlin and Sarkin go to speak with Berlin's fellow soldiers. Berlin is planning to tell them that he and Sarkin are moving to **Paris** permanently and abandoning the search for Cacciato. But before he can explain himself, Eddie tells Berlin that Dwight Eisenhower has died—an important piece of news for Americans. Berlin decides not to mention his plan. Later, Sarkin asks Berlin who Eisenhower was. Berlin replies, "Nobody. A hero."

Eisenhower, one of the key American generals during World War II, represents the strength of traditional American values and power. His death, then, represents the decline of America's status as a moral leader: in only thirty years, American moved from fighting a war (WWII) that most would consider "just" to fighting one (in Vietnam) that almost everyone believes to have been profoundly immoral. The conflation of "a hero" with "nobody" again shows the breakdown of morality and ideals like courage in Vietnam.

Berlin goes to speak with Lieutenant Corson shortly after Eisenhower's death. He finds the lieutenant in his hotel room, smelling of alcohol. Berlin tells Corson that he's thinking of "splitting," and Corson smiles, not unkindly. Corson explains that there's no difference whether Berlin spends his time with Sarkin or his fellow soldiers—in either case, he's already "split" by leaving the war in Vietnam. Berlin is puzzled. Corson explains that the soldiers have, in essence, run away from the war, even if they've tried to rationalize their actions as a "mission" to recover Cacciato. Berlin realizes that Corson is right.

Corson and Berlin have always been on the same side, even if their experiences are very different. Corson understands that Berlin is tired of fighting and searching, as any sane person would be, and Corson himself is tired of these things. Corson is even capable of putting into words that which Berlin has been thinking for some time: the soldiers just wanted to leave Vietnam and go to Paris—none of them really cares about Cacciato.

Berlin leaves Corson, returns to Sarkin, and tells her, "it's done." Sarkin, pleased, takes Berlin to shop for silverware and other housing essentials. In the evening, Sarkin and Berlin return to their hotel to pack up the last of their things. They're amazed to find the soldiers, including Lieutenant Corson, standing in the doorway, carrying their bags and guns. Oscar Johnson orders Berlin to pack his things immediately—the soldiers need to leave. Berlin asks for clarification, but Oscar only tells him that the "chickens are comin' home to roost."

So far, all the sudden shifts in the novel's plot have been for the best, as the soldiers are saved from death or imprisonment. Here, however, the narrative shift pulls Berlin back to earth, reminding him that he has duties to his commanders. Contrary to what seemed to be the case, even in this novel there's no such thing as a free lunch—sooner or later, Berlin must do his duty and go after Cacciato.

CHAPTER 44

The chapter begins with the soldiers and Sarkin walking through the streets of **Paris**, away from their hotel. Berlin asks the soldiers why they need to leave Paris. Doc explains that the hotel clerks have become suspicious about their claims to be American soldiers. One of the clerks called the American embassy, and determined that the soldiers were deserters, illegally stationed in France. Doc points to a park, and tells the soldiers that they should sleep outside for the night. Berlin is reluctant, but agrees.

Doc largely glosses over the details of why they must leave Paris. One could almost suspect him of making up a story, as he did with Captain Rhallon in Tehran, except that this story seems to benefit no one, least of all Doc. Once they've arrived in Paris, the soldiers' goals become more muddled and ambiguous.

The next day, the soldiers wake up, and Berlin suggests that they "take a chance" on the apartment where he and Sarkin had been planning to live. Berlin brings the soldiers to his new home, and they eat dinner there. Over dinner, Eddie proposes that the soldiers travel to Sweden. Oscar dismisses this idea, and tells his soldiers the truth: everyone is in "big trouble." Deserting is a serious offense, Oscar claims. Berlin suggests that the soldiers turn themselves in and explain their mission to hunt down Cacciato. Doc sighs and tells Berlin, "I pity you." He explains that they would need evidence before they turned themselves in. Oscar proposes that the soldiers go on "one last hunt" and track down Cacciato. The soldiers reluctantly agree.

In this section, Oscar Johnson says the same things the characters (and we, the readers) have been thinking for some time. There's simply no way that the soldiers can get away with deserting Vietnam and going to Paris—they're going to have to capture Cacciato. Berlin demonstrates his innocence to the other, more experienced soldiers, proving that he still has a lot to learn. Doc, an older man, knows that the military expects results, and would only take the soldiers seriously if they get their job done.

The next morning, the soldiers begin their search. They take maps and divide **Paris** into sections. Corson refuses to search the city—in part because of his health, and in part because he doesn't recognize the importance of the soldiers' mission. Oscar Johnson takes charge of the hunt for Cacciato. Berlin spends long days patrolling the streets of Paris. At night, he goes back to his apartment with Sarkin, but they're not happy together—Berlin can sense that he won't be able to relax until he finds Cacciato. Sarkin continues to urge Berlin to run away from his soldiers, but Berlin refuses.

There's a distance rapidly growing between Sarkin and Berlin—Berlin can't focus on Sarkin anymore, since he knows he must either arrest Cacciato or go to jail himself. This is (it seems) an entirely imagined "romance," and yet nothing about it has seemed particularly romantic, and it even starts to fall apart here, as Sarkin demands concrete action and Berlin hesitates.

The narrator writes, "The next morning he found Cacciato." Berlin is walking through Les Halles (a neighborhood of **Paris**) when he sees Cacciato walking through the streets, looking healthy and happy. Berlin follows him at a safe distance, looking with amazement at the man he's been trying to hunt down for months. He follows Cacciato through the streets, watching as Cacciato buys a loaf of bread and then sits on a bench, feeding pigeons. Cacciato then walks to a small hotel. Berlin follows him up the stairs of the building, to a small room. Berlin walks inside (the door is open), and sees Cacciato peeling carrots with a knife. Cacciato looks up, sees Berlin, and says, "Hi."

As the novel draws to a close, O'Brien relies upon another sudden, unexpected twist—Cacciato shows up out of nowhere, just when Berlin needs to run into him. The last time Berlin tracked down Cacciato, Cacciato's fellow monks attacked Berlin. Here, Cacciato seems both weaker and more menacing, and he even greets Berlin when Berlin opens his door (which is, surreally, open and unlocked). Cacciato's behavior again seems unreal and dreamlike—apparently he's been expecting Berlin.

The chapter cuts ahead several hours. Berlin is explaining to Doc how he found Cacciato. He shows Doc a slip of paper on which he's written the address of the hotel where Cacciato was staying. As Berlin shows the slip to the other soldiers, he finds himself becoming furious. He shouts that Cacciato left the war for no reason—he's just "a baby." Doc tells Berlin to calm down.

We don't entirely understand why Berlin leaves Cacciato instead of arresting him then and there, and we certainly don't understand why Cacciato doesn't run when Berlin leaves him alone. It may be that Cacciato really is mentally challenged—a possibility that the book intentionally blurs. O'Brien is too subtle to suggest that Cacciato is insane and the soldiers are sane—instead, he implies that everyone who fights in Vietnam loses their mind in some way.

The narrator speaks as if he's describing a scene from a play. He urges the reader to "imagine" a debate between Sarkin and Paul Berlin. The debate takes place at the Majestic Hotel. Sarkin stands on a high stage. Speaking clearly and eloquently, she argues that she and the soldiers have traveled for six months and about 8,600 miles to reach **Paris**—by coincidence, this is the same number of American lives that have been lost in Vietnam in the last six months. After enduring so much pain and suffering, she argues, Berlin should abandon his duty to find Cacciato, and give in to his "dream" of living in Paris with her.

This is another of O'Brien's magical realist touches, and it's amusing to hear Berlin and Sarkin—both of whom are quiet and reserved—speaking loudly and eloquently about their positions. Sarkin's argument is well-phrased, but it hinges on a fundamental selfishness that parallels that of Oscar Johnson. Like Oscar, Sarkin cares only for literal, physical survival—she doesn't think about factors like guilt, loyalty, or nostalgia, all of which impel Berlin to stay in squad three.

The narrator proceeds to urge the reader to "imagine" Paul Berlin's response. Berlin walks onto the stage and delivers an eloquent, sophisticated speech of his own. He explains that he has obligations to his men and to himself: he has voted to continue the hunt for Cacciato, to fight in Vietnam, and to be a loyal soldier. These obligations aren't just rules he must obey—they're parts of his self. To abandon them now would be an act of betrayal—not only to the military, but to his own integrity. With this, Berlin falls silent. Neither he nor Sarkin says anything more—they haven't convinced each other of anything. The narrator concludes, "imagine it."

In the final chapters, the imaginary nature of the book becomes even more obvious, as here the narrator stresses that everything we're reading in the chapter is a fabrication that we must "imagine." And yet the point that the narrator arrives at is true to the characters' motivations, and neither Berlin nor Sarkin succeeds in convincing the other of their position. Just as we've seen throughout the novel, Berlin and Sarkin simply don't have any common ground: they're two very different people who take advantage of each other at the right time.

CHAPTER 45

The time is 6 AM, and Berlin is sitting at the tower, looking out on the water. He thinks about the "facts." Buff, Ready Mix, Rudy Chassler, Pederson, Frenchie Tucker, Bernie Lynn, and Sidney Martin are all dead.

At the observation post Berlin can consider the gruesome realities of his time in Vietnam, seemingly without emotion. But in this scene, at least, he's willing to face the facts rather than repress them or deny them. One such fact is that he's partly responsible for the murder of one of his fellow soldiers—his commander.

Berlin remembers Cacciato, who left the other soldiers, saying he would go to **Paris**. Berlin remembers the day that he and his fellow soldiers chased Cacciato into the mountains, shot the sky "full of flares," and moved in to arrest him. This, Berlin concludes, is "the last known fact—what remained were possibilities." The chapter ends, "With courage it might have been done."

This could be the most literal, straightforward passage in the novel. It suggests that most of the novel we've been reading has been a fantasy, playing out in the mind of the main character, Paul Berlin. Everything after Cacciato's capture in the earliest chapters, O'Brien proposes, is a lie that Berlin tells himself. But this idea simply doesn't do justice to the richness and complexity of the book. While we can say that Berlin is dreaming the book, his dreams and fantasies convey a kind of moral truth to us, and give Berlin a chance to work through his own feelings of guilt and horror.

CHAPTER 46

The chapter opens with Doc announcing that "he" has "split." As Berlin and Doc talk, it becomes clear that Doc is talking about Lieutenant Corson. He and Sarkin have left **Paris**, taking with them everything in the apartment were Berlin and Sarkin were planning to live. Berlin is speechless—he can't believe that Sarkin would leave him without so much as a goodbye. Doc produces a note, which Corson and Sarkin left in the apartment. The note says, "Heading east. A long walk but we'll make it. Affection." Berlin realizes that Corson and Sarkin are planning to return to Vietnam. Doc scoffs—they'll never make it, he insists.

The chapter begins with a stunning betrayal—Sarkin and Corson have left together. While O'Brien foreshadowed this potential romance at several points, it's crushing to read that Sarkin has abandoned Berlin, especially with our knowledge that Berlin is probably making this up. Even in his imagined storyline, he ends up being abandoned and betrayed. It seems that Sarkin was always essentially self-interested, and using the soldiers—the enemies of her country—to her own advantage.

With Lieutenant Corson gone, Oscar Johnson becomes the soldiers' official commanding officer. He orders everyone to stake out Cacciato's hotel and wait for him to leave the building. The soldiers take their guns and prepare for Cacciato. Berlin leads them to the hotel where he found Cacciato. They wait for hours, until it's well past midnight.

It's official now, but Johnson has effectively been the troops' commanding officer for some time now—Corson hasn't done any actual leading since the first chapter of the book.

Oscar tells Berlin and the other soldiers to act as lookouts. He walks away. Some twenty minutes later, Berlin feels a gun jammed into his back—it's Oscar, who's ambushed his own troops to show them what poor soldiers they are. Oscar angrily tells Berlin, Doc, and Eddie that they'll need to obey him at all costs. He also tells Berlin to "go home"—he doesn't think Berlin will be able to handle the "messy stuff" with Cacciato. Berlin insists that he must stay, and Oscar reluctantly agrees, muttering that Berlin has grown "new balls."

In this scene, Berlin seems to come of age, albeit in a sudden, unpredictable way. Oscar pressures and bullies Berlin until Berlin steps up to the challenge of arresting—and perhaps murdering—Cacciato himself. It remains to be seen how "stable" this new persona will be, or if Berlin is only pretending to be tough and mature to fit in with the soldiers he's now stuck with.

Oscar directs his soldiers to proceed inside the hotel. Berlin leads the soldiers up the stairs to the door where he saw Cacciato. Oscar gives Berlin his "**big rifle**," and tells him to open the door.

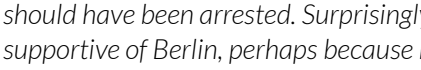
The big rifle has been a symbol of masculinity and experience, and the fact that Berlin tries to carry the big rifle suggests that he's maturing, truly becoming one of the troops for the first time—even if the "maturity" of war means experience at killing people.

Berlin pushes open the door (unlocked) with his new rifle. Inside, there is only darkness. Berlin feels himself getting weak and sick. He drops to the floor, and hears someone say, "Jesus." He also hears the sound of someone running. He smells burning plaster. Berlin hears the sound of "a dozen rounds" going off, though it's not clear who fired them.

In this surreal, hard-to-follow section, Berlin becomes distanced from his fellow troops, his weapon, and even himself. It's suggested that Berlin fires at Cacciato, though there's no description of Cacciato's dead body, or even of Berlin firing. As with other sections of the book, the most gruesome scenes are left to the imagination. Thus, we must also decide if Cacciato is dead, and if Berlin bears the blame for his murder.

The narrative flashes back many months, to the night that Berlin and the other soldiers were supposed to arrest Cacciato on the hill in Vietnam. Stink and Harold Murphy are still present, and Doc tells Berlin to relax—Berlin is suffering from "the biles" once again. Berlin, remembering what has happened to Cacciato, confesses that he regrets what he's done. Doc replies, "It's over," and hands Berlin a canteen of Kool-Aid. Berlin remembers that he was holding the **big rifle** earlier in the night. He apologizes and says, "I didn't mean to." Doc smiles, but Oscar mutters, "Dumbo." Stink says, "We had him."

The timeframe changes suddenly, and we see that we're back in Chapter 1, with Stink and Murphy still around. Reading between the lines, we can guess that Berlin tries to arrest Cacciato for deserting, and ends up accidentally shooting him with his gun (again the big rifle). This suggests that Berlin was trying to be a tough, "masculine" man even at the beginning of the book—and, tragically, the result was that he shot a deserter (and former friend) who should have been arrested. Surprisingly, the soldiers are mostly supportive of Berlin, perhaps because he eliminated Cacciato—the man who could have testified that they murdered Sidney Martin. It is especially poignant that even Berlin's imagined storyline ends with him accidentally killing Cacciato with the big rifle—despite all the distance of fantasy and imagination, he cannot escape the act he has been guiltily circling for so long.



The next day, the soldiers proceed through Vietnam. Lieutenant Corson sends a radio message in which he reports that Cacciato is missing in action. The soldiers talk about the possibility that they'll be stationed at an observation post by the sea—"easy duty."

Here we're more explicitly presented with an alternate version of the novel we've just read, albeit a very brief one. Instead of trying to chasing Cacciato across the continent for desertion, the soldiers corner him in Vietnam, and Berchaseidentally shoots him. Afterwards, Corson lies and says that Cacciato is M.I.A.—not a crime in and of itself. We then begin to see the "full story"—after Corson's report, Berlin, wracked with guilt, goes to the observation post and spends the next few weeks thinking about what might have happened *if he hadn't shot Cacciato. His thoughts late at night are a kind of penitence, a way of bringing Cacciato back to life and softening the horror of his own act of murder. O'Brien doesn't explicitly say that Berlin shot Cacciato, but it's strongly and repeatedly implied, making the event much more disturbing.*

Later in the night, Berlin wakes up to find Lieutenant Corson sitting next to him. Corson tells Berlin, "I guess it's better this way." Together, they discuss Cacciato's desertion, and the possibility that Cacciato would have succeeded in walking to **Paris**. The odds of such a thing are "miserable." Nevertheless, it's possible that Cacciato could make it—"Maybe so," Lieutenant Corson says.

As the novel reaches an end, we see the importance of the story of Cacciato's desertion. It's a story that Berlin tells himself, again and again, until he believes it to be true. Berlin needs to believe this story, because he can't face the truth: Berlin shot and killed Cacciato, and it really would be impossible to walk to Paris from Vietnam—that is, to physically escape one's trauma and find peace. Stories, we finally see, are a way of reviving the dead, absolving the guilty, and processing horrific experiences.

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